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ABSTRACT

This document contains the 12 issues of the newsletter "Rural Policy Matters" published in 2000. Issues examine recent educational research on small and rural schools; report on state standards and court litigation related to rural schools, the efforts of communities to save their local schools, and the condition of rural facilities; outline policy issues related to rural school funding and school reform; and list new publications and Web sites of interest. Articles include: "Smaller Schools Can Reduce Poverty's Power: Georgia Research Results Released"; "Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools"; "Small Schools Thwart Poverty: Results from Ohio and Texas Show Boost in Achievement"; "Smaller Schools Stem Poverty's Power: Montana Research Results Released"; "Idaho Facing Facilities Crisis: Poor or Dangerous Conditions Highlighted in Lawsuit"; "Closing the Spending Gap: Pennsylvania Eyes Equity Finance Options"; "Declining Enrollment: Silent Killer of Rural Communities"; "Georgia Adopts Major School Reforms"; "Pennsylvania: A State of Denial on School Funding"; "New Vermont Standards: Sustainability and Understanding Place"; "Colorado Charters: An Antidote for Consolidation?" "Rural Minnesota's Charter Schools"; "Court Upholds School Closure: Allegany County, Maryland Activists Change Focus"; "Creating Schools as Centers of Community"; "Why Rural Matters: Gauging Importance and the Need for Action in Each State"; "Community Counts When School Reform Matters"; "The Changing Face of Rural America: Newly Diverse Communities Struggle with New Demands"; "Groups Build Grassroots Leadership in the Southeast"; "New Study Finds Small Districts Work Too"; "Ohio Finance Litigation: Winning Isn't Everything"; and "Small Does Work: A Florida Story You'll Want To Hear." (SV)

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Rural Policy Matters Newsletter:

Volumes January- December 2000

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RPM 2.1
Rural Policy Matters
January 2000 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Smaller Schools Can Reduce Poverty's Power

Georgia Research Results Released

New research released in Atlanta on December 10th shows Georgia's smaller schools reduce the damaging effects of poverty on student achievement and help students from poorer communities narrow the achievement gap between them and students from wealthier communities.

Poverty is generally understood to have a negative effect on student achievement. Researchers Craig Howley of Ohio University and Robert Bickel of Marshall University sought to discover whether smaller schools can weaken this relationship by reducing the damaging effects of poverty on achievement. The clear conclusion is that they can.

The research, funded by the Rural School and Community Trust, is one of a series of four state-level studies to address this issue. Results of the other state studies—on Montana, Ohio, and Texas—will be released at the end of January 2000.

In each state, the same methods were used to measure how achievement levels of students in various grades of nearly every school in the state were related to:

- the level of poverty in the school and district,
- the school and district enrollment size, and
- the interaction between these two factors.

The research included all regular schools and districts in each state, with only a few exceptions for those with missing data. In all, about 13,600 schools in 2,290 districts were studied in these four states collectively.

Analysis

The researchers looked for two kinds of effects:

- The "excellence effect" of school size—Does a school or school district's size influence its students' performance differently depending on the level of poverty in the communities from which the students come? Regression analysis is used to indicate how achievement scores change as school size changes in communities of differing poverty levels.
- The "equity effect" —How much of the variance in average test scores among schools can be attributed to differing levels of poverty in the communities the schools serve? Is poverty's power over student achievement greater in smaller or larger schools? Correlation analysis is used to show whether the link between poverty and low levels of achievement is stronger in schools above or below median size.

How it plays out in Georgia

In Georgia, the achievement data used were

- the mean school level percentile scores on seven separate tests and one composite for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in grades 3, 5, and 8, and
- the percentage of students who pass the four separate components and the composite on the Georgia High School Graduation Test on first administration in grade 11.

Test scores were analyzed from 1,626 of the approximately 1,800 schools in Georgia. The schools not included were mostly those that do not include the grades in which statewide standardized tests are administered.

The poverty level in the schools was measured by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch.

The school size was measured as the number of students per grade level to control for differences in the number of grades in a school. In Georgia, schools are larger than in many states. Only about eight percent of elementary students attend schools with under 350 students and only 17 percent of secondary students attend schools with under 900.

Results: Excellence Effects

In Georgia, as school size increases, the average achievement score in schools serving children from poorer communities falls on 27 of 29 test scores (the only exceptions were science scores in grades 3 and 5).

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Big Trouble for Small Schools

Aid Formula Changes Hit Nebraska Rural Schools

Ninety small school districts serving 23,000 children in Nebraska have each lost at least 10 percent of their state aid due to recent changes in the aid formula, according to an analysis done for the Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, a part-nership of farm, rural, and education organizations. Together, these small districts have lost about $15 million in aid. Most of them are in the more densely populated rural areas in the eastern and central regions of Nebraska where consolidation has been deeply resisted, to the chagrin of some policy makers. The recent aid changes are "counterproductive," working against the goal of better educational results, says the report. For a copy of *Big Trouble for Small Schools*, write Kim Preston, Center for Rural Affairs, Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067 or e-mail kimp@cfra.org.❖

Matters of Fact

1998 Civics Report Card

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has released its 1998 Civics Report Card, which reports on the 1998 civics assessment for the nation. At grades 4 and 8, students from schools in urban fringe/large town and rural/small town locations had higher average scale scores than their peers in central city schools. At grade 8, students from schools in urban fringe/large town locations outperformed their peers from schools in rural/small town locations. For more information, see http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/civics.asp

Education policy year in review

Teacher shortages, school choice, finance, and violence topped Stateline's list of important education policy issues in 1999. The list, which reviews state education policy highlights for the year, can be found at www.stateline.org/story.cfm?storyid=53702.

New data on dropouts

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released a report on dropout and high school completion rates. The report, entitled "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1998," includes state level information for the 1990s. From 1996-98, the state with the lowest high school completion rate was Oregon at 75.4% of 18 to 24 year-olds. The state with the highest completion rate was North Dakota, at 94.7% of 18 to 24 year olds. For the complete report, visit the NCES web site at nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000022 or call Chris Chapman at 202.219.4182.

State profiles of accountability policies

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has published a compendium of state policies on public rankings and categorizations of schools/districts. The paper looks at the policies of the 26 states that publicly categorize and/or rank schools and districts and provides information on the means of reporting and the formulas and indicators used to determine school/district categories. Of the 26 states profiled, only one (Wisconsin) uses an indicator that takes the smallness of a school into account. For the complete report, visit www.ecs.org or call 303.299.3600.

Public support for public schools

A recent poll by the Public Education Network shows that the majority of respondents feel that improving public education is the most important civic priority today. Most of those polled recognize that schools need community support and involvement in order to raise student achievement. The poll, "All for All: Strengthening Community Involvement for All Students," can be found at the Public Education Network's website at www.publiceducation.org❖

Poverty's Power

continued from page 1

Results: Equity Effects

Researchers calculated the proportion of the variance in test scores that can be explained by the level of the poverty in the communities served by schools. This statistic, called "poverty's power rating," was calculated for larger and for smaller schools (those above and below the median size).

The results for Georgia schools:

- In all grades and on all 29 standardized test scores, poverty's power rating is substantially lower in Georgia schools that are below the median size than it is in Georgia schools above the median size.
- In larger schools, poverty's power rating ranged from 49 to 79 percent, depending on grade and subject area tested.
- In smaller schools, poverty's power rating ranged from 18 to 53 percent.
- In head-to-head comparisons, smaller schools produced lower poverty power ratings than larger schools on every test in every grade (29 comparisons).
- Smaller schools cut poverty's power over composite achievement by between one-third (8th grade) and one-half (11th grade),
- Smaller schools cut poverty's power over achievement on specific tests by at least one-fifth (8th grade reading vocabulary) in every case and by as much as two-thirds on a specific test (11th grade English).

Not Related to Race

These results were not significantly altered (but slightly strengthened) when researchers control for race. Small schools are a major positive factor in student achievement among the poor, race notwithstanding.

Schools "At-Risk" of Lower Student Performance

The good news is that schools serving poorer communities in Georgia are, on average, smaller than schools serving communities that are better off. The bad news is that they are too large to optimize achievement. Between one-third and two-thirds (depending on grade level analyzed) of students tested are in schools whose students' average achievement score would likely increase if the school were smaller. These schools would be at risk of lower student performance if they were enlarged. They are currently smaller than other Georgia schools and they disproportionately serve African-American students.

Conclusions

- The poorer the community served, the smaller a school should be to maximize the school's performance as measured by standardized tests.
- If improving student achievement as measured by standardized tests is a policy goal, states should consider placing maximum size limits on schools, particularly in poorer communities.
- States concerned about reinvesting in deteriorating school facilities should not be eager to increase school size in most instances if higher student achievement is a goal.

For more information on the study, visit our website at www.ruraledu.org or call the Policy Program office at 802.728.5899.❖

Notes from Way North

Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools

Like most other states, Alaska has developed and adopted "content standards" with accompanying benchmark assessments to define what students should know and be able to do as they go through school. In addition, performance standards have been developed for teachers and administrators, and a set of "quality school standards" have been developed that are to eventually serve as a basis for accrediting schools in Alaska. Since these state standards are written for general use throughout Alaska, however, they don't always address some of the special issues that are of critical importance to schools in rural Alaska, particularly those serving Alaska Native communities and students.

Through the efforts of personnel associated with the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative/Rural Challenge, Alaska Native educators have developed another set of "Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools" for consideration by schools serving Native students around the state. These "cultural standards" are addressed to students, teachers, curricula, schools and communities, and have been adopted by the Alaska State Board of Education. Though the emphasis is on rural schools serving Native communities, many of the standards are applicable to all students and communities, because they focus curricular attention on in-depth study of the surrounding physical and cultural environment in which the school is situated.

The cultural standards serve as a complement to, not as a replacement for, those adopted by the State of Alaska. While the state standards stipulate what students should know and be able to do, the cultural standards are oriented more toward providing guidance on how to get them there in such a way that they become responsible, capable and whole human beings in the process. The emphasis is on fostering a strong connection between what students experience in school and their lives out of school by providing opportunities for students to engage in in-depth experiential learning in real-world contexts. By shifting the focus in the curriculum from teaching about cultural heritage as another subject to teaching through the local culture as a foundation for all education, the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools represent a locally appropriate model for the kind of "context" standards described in the Rural Trust policy statement on educational standards.

The full text of the Alaska cultural standards can be obtained by going to the Alaska Native Knowledge Network web site at http://www.ankn.uaf.edu. For more information contact Ray Barnhardt at the Alaska Rural Challenge/ Rural Systemic Initiative by sending e-mail to ffrjb@aurora.alaska.edu or by calling 907.274.3611.❖

Rural Schools in the North

A Case For Appropriate Design

Schools in rural Alaska are often alien institutions, not just culturally and educationally, but physically as well. They are usually the most imposing and expensive structure in rural communities with designs that are often replicas of their urban counterparts with technologically complex, externally dependent systems that are ill-suited to the northern climate. Some would argue that this "bigger is better" aspect of rural education is as it should be, both in terms of improving education and advancing the quality of life in northern communities.

There is a price to be paid, however, in materials cost, in energy costs, in maintenance costs, in educational costs and in loss of a sense of local ownership. Ray Barnhardt and Pat Dubbs, the authors of an article critiquing rural school facilities in Alaska titled "The Log School: A Case for Appropriate Design," suggest that schools would be more appropriate if built to match the environment and draw as much as possible on locally available materials, expertise, and energy sources. External support systems cannot be relied upon in the northern environment. Out of necessity, rural communities must be self-reliant and self-sufficient to a much greater degree than communities in a more temperate environment.

The authors argue that it is indeed possible to provide culturally and environmentally appropriate structures for schools in a northern environment. Furthermore, a more localized approach to the design, construction, and operation of schools can provide many benefits, not the least of which is a reduction in the dependency of those communities on external resources and expertise. All of this can lead to a more productive environment for education and other vital processes in northern communities.

The full text of Barnhardt and Dubbs' article be found on the web at www.ruraledu.org/logschool.html or is available by calling the Policy Program office at 802.728.5899.❖

PBS Show Focuses on Digital Divide

We list a lot of web site addresses in this newsletter, but how many rural people are actually able to use those resources? A new show from PBS "shines a light on the role computers play in widening social gaps throughout our society, particularly among young people." Look for the PBS broadcast of "Digital Divide" on January 28, 2000 at 9:00 pm. Check for the show in your local listings and if you are one of those people who already has access to the Internet, visit their web site, www.pbs.org/digitaldivide, for more information.❖

Projects Voice Concerns to Georgia's Barnes Commission

The Education Reform Study Commission set up by Georgia Governor Roy Barnes made its recommendations public on December 16, 1999. Over the past several months the commission had active input from two Georgia-based Rural Trust partner projects.

Carl Chairman of the League of Professional Schools presented an issue paper, *School-based Authority and Responsibility*, to the Commission's Accountability Committee and later addressed the Commission. Glickman's paper is available at www.coe.uga.edu/coenews/1999/GlickmanFullPaper on the web. Community members associated with the Center for Children and Education testified on the needs of rural schools at commission hearings. You can find out more about their efforts at www.hometown.aol.com/GaSchools or by calling 912.750.1007

In presenting its recommendations, the Commission also mentioned the Rural Trust's recent release of research on school size, poverty, and student achievement (see story on page 1). What influence any of these efforts had on the thinking of the commission is hard to gauge. Rural schools were not necessarily big winners, but some doors for innovation and local control may have been opened. We'll watch how things play out in the coming legislative session.❖

Rural Policy Matters
RPM 2.1 **January 2000**

Rural Policy Matters is published by the Rural School and Community Trust.

The Rural School and Community Trust seeks to understand complex issues affecting rural schools and communities; to inform the public debate over rural education policy; and to help rural communities act on education policy issues affecting them. Comments, questions, and contributions for *Rural Policy Matters* should be sent to:

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Rural Policy Matters

February 2000 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Small Schools Thwart Poverty

Results from Ohio and Texas show boost in achievement

In Georgia, Ohio, and Texas, there is strong evidence that the effect of school size on the average academic achievement of students depends on the level of poverty among the students in the school. The lower the income of the community served by the schools, the more achievement will be adversely affected by larger schools and improved by smaller schools.

Last month we reported on the results of research in Georgia concerning this relationship between school size, student achievement and poverty level. This month we continue with the release of results for Ohio and Texas. Montana was the forth and final state studied by Craig Howley and Robert Bickel with support from the Rural Trust.

Researchers calculated the proportion of the variance in test scores among smaller and larger schools that can be explained by the level of the poverty in the communities served by these schools. This statistic was calculated for the group of schools above and the group of schools below the median size. We call this statistic "poverty's power rating" because it suggests how much negative impact poverty has over student achievement in each group of schools.

In all four states, smaller schools reduce the negative effect of poverty on school performance by at least 20 percent and by as much as 70 percent, and usually by 30-50 percent. Details for Ohio and Texas are below. For more detailed reports, contact the Policy Program Office or see our website at www.ruraledu.org.❖

Ohio Data

In Ohio, the achievement data were from the Ohio Proficiency Tests administered in grades 4, 6, 9, and 12 in each school. Test s[illegible]s were analyzed from 3,841 schools in 611 districts.

The poverty level in the schools was measured by the percent of students in the school district who live in families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

The school size was measured as the average number of students per school grade to control for differences in the number of grades in a school. Ohio schools and communities closely parallel national averages, with 49 percent of secondary students attending schools with under 900 students; only 24 percent of the elementary students attend schools with under 350 students.

Small Schools Better for Poorer Communities

In Ohio both smaller schools and smaller districts produce higher achievement in poorer communities; larger school and districts produce higher achievement in wealthier communities. Ohio was the only one of the four states where the interactive effect was apparent whether the analysis considered the size of the school or the school district.

This "interaction" between school size and poverty affects achievement most clearly in rural and small-town schools. In those communities, school size alone does not have much direct effect on achievement–the effect of school size on achievement depends strongly on the poverty level in the community.

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Texas Data

In Texas, the achievement data used were the average scores for each school on three sections (reading, mathematics, and writing) of the 1996-97 Texas Assessment of Academic Success for grades 8 and 10; two sections (reading and math) for grades 3 and 5. Test scores were analyzed from 6,288 schools in 960 districts.

The poverty level in the schools was measured by the percent of students in the school who qualify for free and reduced priced lunches.

The school size was measured as the average number of students per school grade to control for differences in the number of grades in a school. Only 10 percent of elementary students attend a school with under 350 students; only 24 percent of secondary students attend a school with under 900 students.

In Texas, specifically, as school size increases, poverty has a more powerful negative effect on achievement scores. In 8 of 10 testing instances (the exception is fifth grade math and reading) there is a statistically significant negative effect on achievement due to the interaction between poverty and school size.

Poverty's "Power Rating" Weakened By Small Schools

- In all grades and in all subject areas tested (reading, mathematics, and writing), poverty's power rating is substantially lower in Texas schools that are below the median size than it is in Texas schools above the median size.
- In larger schools, poverty's power rating ranged from at least 30 percent to as high as 62 percent, depending on

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Ohio data

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But in urban areas, larger schools are strongly associated with weaker achievement at all levels of poverty, although there is also some interaction between school size and poverty that affects achievement.

The interaction between school size and poverty is most pronounced at ninth grade. At this level the negative effect of larger schools is apparent in all communities except those with no participation in public assistance programs (as measured by TANF rates), and become statistically significant at TANF rates as low as 12.5 percent.

Poverty's "Power Rating" Weakened By Small Schools

- In all grades, poverty's power rating is substantially lower in Ohio schools that are below the median size than it is in Ohio schools above the median size. The smaller schools had overall comparable achievement scores.
- In larger schools, poverty's power rating ranged from 41 to 59 percent, depending on grade and passing standard. In smaller schools, poverty's power rating ranged from 27 to 33 percent.
- In head-to-head comparisons, smaller schools produced lower poverty power ratings than larger schools in every grade.
- Smaller schools cut poverty's power over achievement by between one-fourth and one-half. These effects were also apparent for school district size, as well as for school size.

Conclusions

Many Ohio schools serving moderate- to low-income communities would likely produce higher student achievement scores if they were smaller.

In urban areas of Ohio, larger schools adversely affect student achievement in communities at all income levels. In rural areas, larger schools adversely affect student achievement in low- and moderate-income communities, but not in wealthier communities.

Texas data

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grade and subject area.

- In smaller schools, poverty's power rating ranged from as low as 3 to no higher than 31 percent.
- In the critical grades 8 and 10, where children are most at-risk of dropping out, small schools cut poverty's power over achievement by 80 to 90 percent in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Conclusions

Poverty's power over student achievement is much stronger–as much as ten times stronger–in larger schools than smaller ones in Texas, depending on grade level and academic area.

From one-fourth to one-half of Texas students are in schools whose achievement level would likely improve if the school were smaller and would likely worsen if the school were larger. This is especially true for students in the critical drop-out stage.

These results were not significantly altered (but slightly strengthened) when researchers controlled for race. Enrollment of Hispanic students in schools that are already too large to produce optimum achievement is two and one-half to three times higher than Hispanic enrollment in schools not too large.

Many smaller schools serve lower income rural communities. While not all these are "good" schools, and while all schools can surely be improved, the smallness of these schools is an asset to student achievement, and enlarging them would likely produce lower achievement scores.❖

At the ninth grade level, 90 percent of Ohio's schools serving communities with a TANF rate as low as 2.22 percent are at risk of poorer performance if the school were enlarged, and would likely produce better performance if the school were smaller. These schools serve 89 percent of ninth graders.❖

Busing Hearings in West Virginia

Citizens tell their tales

Challenge West Virginia, a citizens group funded in part by the Rural Trust, recently sponsored a series of hearings around the state to gather testimony on the difficulties students and parents face when school bus rides are too long. Though the distances traveled in West Virginia may not seem too great to our friends in the plains or Alaska, the rough terrain and twisting mountain roads can make for travel times that are often over an hour, and sometimes closer to two hours, one way. The consolidation of schools in West Virginia, continued at a fast pace through the end of the century, has often closed community schools in favor of new, isolated campuses that are out of the way for everyone.

A student reported that his schedule only allowed him to see a working parent on the weekends. Others noted that they avoid higher level classes because after a 10 or 11 hour school day, they simply don't have more time in the evenings for the extra homework. One student testified that she spends 32 percent of her school day riding a bus. Even young students may have to spend stretches of unsupervised time waiting for bus transfers.

Challenge West Virginia has supported the introduction of House Bill 2051, The Better Schools Bill, and the stories gathered through the hearings will help inform the debate. The bill would hold schools to the already recommended limits on the time students are expected to spend in transportation—one-way trips of 30, 45, and 60 minutes for elementary, middle, and high school students, respectively. H.B. 2051 would require the State's School Building Authority to take such community concerns into consideration when they are thinking of closing schools.

For more information contact Linda Martin at 304.744.5916, email her at LBM94@aol.com, or visit the Challenge West Virginia website at www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv❖

Matters of Fact

Iowa lawmakers to look at rural education issues

Iowa lawmakers are expected to spend time during the 2000 session trying to deal with the inequalities between urban areas and rural communities. Critics have said that the school finance system in Iowa sets up a system of haves and have-nots. One prominent issue is the new local-option sales tax for school building repairs that helps urban counties with significant retail bases more than rural counties with relatively small shopping districts. Declining enrollments (68 percent of Iowa's 375 districts saw declining enrollments this year) and the expiration of the state's funding formula will also be addressed.

Research on schools, parents, and communities

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) winter newsletter, *The Link*, features articles about schools, parents, and communities. They report that "meaningful community engagement sets in motion a chain of events that transforms the culture of the school and, often, the community that the school serves." To see the newsletter, visit http://www.ael.org/link/v18n4/index.htm, or call 800-624-9120.

Leadership crisis in Texas

The *International Electronic Journal For Leadership in Learning* has published a study titled "Superintendent Exiting in Texas•A Challenge for Rural and Small Districts?" which looks at the high turnover rate of superintendents in rural and small school districts. In addition to the high turnover, there is a shrinking number of applicants for superintendent vacancies. The full text of the study can be found at http://www.ucalgary.ca/~iejll/volume3/czaja.html

Teacher quality, student achievement, and state policy

The Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA) has published a study by Linda Darling-Hammond on teacher quality and student achievement. The study, "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence", reviews data from a 50-state survey of policies, state case study analyses, the 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to examine ways in which teacher qualifications and other school inputs are related to student achievement across states. The study can be found at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1.

Internet access is not always enough

A 1999 survey of teachers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia on educational software use reveals that 83 percent of teachers never use computers in their classrooms. The report, "Educational Software Use: Results From a 1999 Regional Survey", was conducted by SEIR•TEC at AEL and can be found at http://www.ael.org/rtec/surintro.htm or call 800-624-9120 to receive a print version.

Rural Youth and Drugs

A study released in January by the U.S. Conference of Mayors has startling statistics for rural areas. As the New York Times reports, rural eighth graders are more likely to use a number of drugs than their urban peers. How much more likely? Amphetamines (including methamphetamines), 104 percent; cocaine, 50 percent; crack cocaine, 83 percent; marijuana, 34 percent. The research was conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. In light of President Clinton's proposal of $1.6 billion in aid to Columbia to fight drugs at the source, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., who heads the research group, called for matching "dollar for dollar aid to Colombia with aid to the rural communities."❖

Notes on Facilities

Funding Comes with Need for Community Guidance

Communities members rarely participate fully in the planning and design of school facilities, and even more rarely do communities and schools work together to create facilities that can truly be "centers of community." Without significant community discussion of the needs, assets, and possibilities in a district, money may be spent to fund schools that are outmoded before they are built.

According to the National Clearinghouse of Educational Facilities the State of Texas spent approximately $1.9 billion in school construction projects initiated during the year or underway. In California, Florida, New York and Texas, construction costs exceeded $1 billion in 1999, while Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania spent between $800 million and $1 billion. While it varies from state to state, new money is now being targeted to renovate and replace the nation's aging school facilities. (see NCEF: K-12 School Construction Facts: Number 2, October, 1999, www.edfacilities.org or call 888.552.0624)

Ohio Case Heard

On November 16, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the DeRolphe case, which was originally filed by the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools. The plaintiffs argued that the state of Ohio does not treat schools in poor districts fairly and that distribution of state money for facilities is inequitable. The original plaintiffs, joined by many urban districts, are cautiously optimistic that they will win. However, the suit has already forced many in Ohio, including Governor Taft to acknowledge that there is a serious problem with school facilities in the state and to encourage legislators to enact corrective measures.

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Notes on Facilities

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Facilities Condition and Achievement

In 1993 researchers noted that there is a "relationship between building condition and student achievement in small, rural, Virginia high schools." Student achievement was five percentile points lower in buildings with lower quality ratings, after adjusting for socioeconomic status. Lower achievement was associated with specific building condition factors such as substandard science facilities, air conditioning, locker conditions, classroom furniture, more graffiti, and noisy external environments." (from "The Urgent Need for School Construction and Modernization", US Dept.of Ed: 1999, available at http://165.224.220.67/inits/construction/urgentneed.html).❖

School Technology Predictions

[There could be a] great expansion in the after-school hours use of computers and networking facilities by groups other than K-12 students and teachers. [At the same time there could be] a growing movement to regard the school as a "community resource" rather than as a single-purpose institution, especially when there is expensive equipment sitting in the school doing nothing every night and weekend.

Gary Chapman, social policy researcher and director of the 21st Century Project at the University of Texas in Austin.

From the *New York Times* (January 5, 2000), "Predictions for the Top Tech Issues in Schools", by Pamela Mendels. Full article available through www.nytimes.com.

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Rural Policy Matters
RPM 2.2 **February 2000**

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RPM 2.3

Rural Policy Matters

March 2000

A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action

www.ruraledu.org

Smaller Schools Stem Poverty's Power

Montana Research Results Released

New research shows that Montana's smaller schools and school districts reduce the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement. The research results, released by the Rural School and Community Trust, reflect data from nearly all of Montana's urban, suburban, and rural public schools.

Poverty is generally understood to have a negative effect on student achievement. Researchers Craig Howley of Ohio University and Robert Bickel of Marshall University sought to discover whether smaller schools can weaken this relationship. The clear conclusion is that they can.

In each of four states studied–Montana, Ohio, Texas, and Georgia–the same methods were used to measure how achievement levels of students in various grades of nearly every school in the state were related to the level of poverty in the school and district;the school and district enrollment size; and, the interaction between these two factors.

The research included all regular schools and districts in each state, with only a few exceptions for those with missing data. In all, about 13,600 schools in 2290 districts were studied in these four states collectively.

The researchers looked for two kinds of effects:

- The **"excellence effect"** of school size – Does a school or school district's size influence its students' performance differently depending on the level of poverty in the communities from which the students come? Regression analysis is used to indicate how achievement scores change as school size changes in communities of differing poverty levels.
- The **"equity effect"** – How much of the variance in average test scores among schools can be attributed to differing levels of poverty in the communities the schools serve? Is poverty's power over student achievement greater in smaller or larger schools? Correlation analysis is used to show whether the link between poverty and low levels of achievement is stronger in schools above or below median size.

For this research, the unit of analysis is the school, not the individual student. This is appropriate in today's policy environment because teachers, administrators, and leaders are increasingly held accountable for the aggregate performance of their students.

In Montana the researchers analyzed the test scores for grades 4, 8, and 11 in 889 schools in 457 districts. The poverty level in the schools was measured by the percentage of stu-dents in the school district who receive free or reduced-price lunches.

The school size was measured as the average number of students per school grade to control for differences in the number of grades in a school. Because the methodology involves regression and correlation analysis, the study uses no absolute definition of smallness, but analyzes how relatively smaller schools perform compared to relatively larger schools.

Montana is a state composed mostly of schools that are small by national standards. About 75% of Montana's elementary and secondary schools enroll fewer than 300 students; 56% of elementary students attend schools with under 350 students; 57% of secondary students attend schools with under 900

continued on page 2

Rural Poverty Matters

We often hear that inner city poverty is more "grinding" than rural poverty, and that it is more likely to affect minorities in the city than in rural areas. Maybe not.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 1998, after adjusting a family's income for state and federal income and employment taxes (or credits), government cash transfers, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and school lunches, African-Americans and Hispanics who live in rural areas are more likely to live in poverty than African-Americans and Hispanics who live in inner cities. Many programs and policies intended to alleviate the grind seem to pull up short in rural areas.

Even using the more usual measurement of poverty based simply on money income (without any of these adjustments for taxes and transfers), African-Americans who live in rural areas are still more likely to live in poverty (29.8%) than African-Americans who live in an inner city (29.3%). Hispanics who live in rural areas are a little less likely to live in poverty than those who live in inner cities, using the simpler definition. But the poverty rate for Hispanics is high in either case: 26.9% rural versus 29.7% inner city.

White people are only slightly less likely to live in poverty in rural areas than in inner cities–12.4% versus 14.9% using the standard measure of poverty, and 10.2% versus 11.3% using the adjusted poverty measure. The Census Bureau does not report data in this format for Native Americans.❖

RC 022629

A Wisconsin Community Technology Center

Telecomm advocacy gets a local boost

In Shullsburg,Wisconsin, a new, 24-station computer center in the local school has opened its doors to the public and is tapping the talents and interests of students while addressing the training needs of the community. At the same time, everyone involved is learning more about the important technology policy issues impacting their area. Rick Rolfsmeyer reported on the Center in the Dodgeville Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce & Main Street Partnership newsletter (Nov. 1999);

Starting appropriately in the newest millennium, the Shullsburg Community Technology Center will provide almost year-round access to computers and the Internet to all residents of the district. Special efforts will be made to reach the most disadvantaged including the elderly and single parents. Residents of the City and surrounding townships currently have public access to only one computer, through the small public library.

The Community Technology Center will provide 10 community workshops in its first year, five addressing the use and fun of a computer, and another five related to using the Internet for education, shopping, communication, or just about anything else. Students will be involved in developing the lesson plans for these workshops, and then will function as teachers and mentors for their neighbors and families. Moreover, students will assist in the preparation of public information materials through current class work such as desktop publishing. Residents can attend sessions or just come in on an open night. Help will always be nearby.

In addition to this training service, the Technology Center has plans for educating the public about policy issues related to telecommunications. First, the students and staff of the center will do research to become more fluent with legislation, such as Senate bill 1153, which proposes establishing a rural-oriented federal policy effort. Community forums will follow, where the participants are taught how to use the Internet as a research tool to learn more about various legislation and how to identify and contact key legislators–all valuable skills for any active citizen, and ones that increase their confidence and ability with the technology.

For more information contact Rick Rolfsmeyer at the Wisconsin Rural Challenge, 7087 Hwy. 39, Hollandale, WI 53544, e-mail to ricky-r@mhtc.net or call him at 608.967.2322.❖

Smaller Schools

continued from page 1

students. On average there are fewer than 2 schools per district, and just 51 districts offer instruction in all grades K-12.

Howley and Bickel also calculated the proportion of the variance in test scores that can be explained by the level of the poverty in the communities served by schools. This statistic–called "poverty's power rating"–was calculated for larger and for smaller schools (those above and below the median size). They found that:

- Smaller schools significantly reduce poverty's power to dampen student achievement in two of the three grades in which tests are given.
- Overall, academic achievement scores in Montana's smaller schools was as high or higher than in larger schools for all grades, despite the fact that the poverty level in the smaller schools averaged between 15 and 52 percent higher.

The researchers found even more powerful results in an analysis of Montana's school districts. There, in 9 out of 11 comparisons of larger and smaller districts, poverty's power rating was lower in the smaller districts. Despite having a poverty rate about 16 percent higher, smaller districts outper-formed larger districts on standardized tests.

Conclusions that can be drawn from this study include:

- Small schools and districts in Montana do an excellent job of cutting poverty's power over student achievement. Poverty has three-to-four times as much power to weaken student achievement in larger schools and districts than in smaller schools and districts.
- At the critical eighth-grade level, where children are at or approaching an age when they are most at risk of dropping out of school, Montana's small schools and districts cut poverty's power over student achievement the most. In fact, small school districts have higher test scores than larger school districts at this critical age, despite serving communities with higher levels of poverty.
- Many of Montana's smaller schools serve lower income rural communities. While not all these are "good" schools, and while all schools can surely be improved, the smallness of these schools is an asset to student achievement, and consolidating them into larger schools would likely produce lower achievement scores.

Overall, Montana appears to have derived substantial benefits from its historic decision to maintain small schools and districts. Evidence for the equity effect of small schools and districts is very strong. High test scores reveal the excellent results of Montana's schools overall, but this study reveals that Montana's commitment to small schools has worked well to cultivate academic excellence in its least affluent communities. Perhaps Montana's traditionally high level of performance on tests given for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is in part attributable to the small scale of the state's educational system, both schools and districts.❖

Matters of Fact

Need Facts Fast?
A new tool from the National Center for Education Statistics provides fast answers to education questions. The NCES Fast Facts tool reports that in 1997-98, more public schools were classified as rural (21,636) than any other community type. Visit www.nces.ed.gov/fastfacts for more information, or call 202.219.1828.

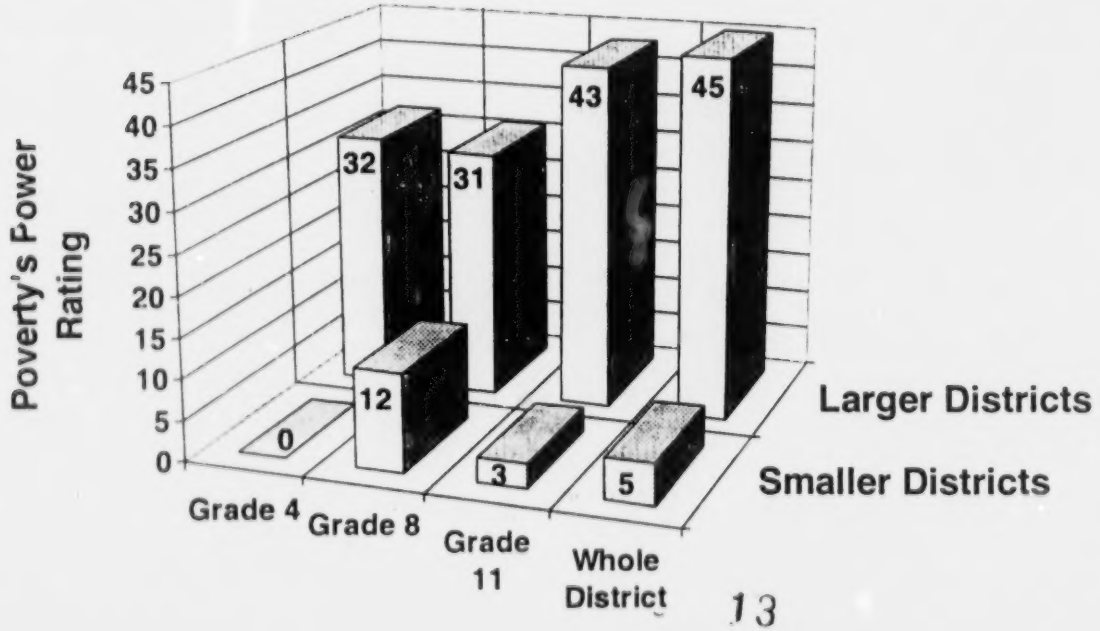
Teacher Shortage in Iowa
Legislators in Iowa are trying to come up with solutions to the state's projected teacher shortage, which is being exacerbated by other states' teacher recruitment programs. Rural areas are particularly vulnerable. The Des Moines Register reports that "The increased competition from school employers in other states comes on top of competition within Iowa for teachers. Urban school districts, which offer salaries averaging about $12,000 more than small, rural districts, have an advantage" (2/14/00).

State Education Profiles Available
The National Center for Education Statistics has recently released state education profiles for each state. The summary data include demographic and membership characteristics of schools and districts, grade levels in schools, urbanicity, number of students by race/ethnicity, high school completers and dropouts, achievement levels of students, number and proportions of instructional, support services, and administrative staff, pupil-teacher ratio, salary information, teacher preparation, federal education aid to states, and revenue and expenditure information. Reports can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000304.

Utah Proposal Addresses Small School Funding Inequities
Katherine Kapos in the Salt Lake Tribune (2/10/00) reports that some rural Utah schools may get additional funding to cope with the legitimate costs of providing quality education in remote, small-scale operations. State Rep. Bradley Johnson, R-Aurora, is sponsoring House Bill 166 to address the inequities between urban and suburban schools and those in rural areas through implementation of a funding formula that takes school size and isolation into consideration.

Internet Access in Rural and Small Schools
A new report on Internet access in public schools finds that access in rural and small schools increased significantly between 1994 and 1999. In 1994, 35% of rural schools and 30% of schools with enrollments under 300 had Internet access. By 1999, 96% of both rural schools and small schools were at least minimally connected. For the complete report, "Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-99", visit http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000086.❖

Poverty's Power Over Student Achievement in 51 K-12 Districts in Montana



Tree Harvests and School Funding

National Forest Bill Now in Senate

The debate that played out in the House last fall over legislation linking rural school funds to timber sales on National Forest lands moves ahead now with S. 1608, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 1999. The House passed a companion bill aimed at giving relief to rural counties most impacted by the reduction in timber sales from federal lands in recent years. Many systems' budgets were heavily hit when federal timber revenues dropped due to changes in management practices, environmental concerns, and market pressures. S. 1608 has the endorsement of the National Education Association and the American Association of Superintendents and Administrators, but the Sierra Club and other conservation groups are against it. Detractors complain that the bill requires the Forest Service to cut trees in order to fund children's education. They would prefer the Clinton administration proposal that removes the linkage between school funding and actual timber sales, dropping the incentive to cut trees to provide education funding, and offering an alternative secure revenue stream for communities.❖

Got stories to share? Let us know.

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RPM 2.4

Rural Policy Matters

April 2000 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Idaho Facing Facilities Crisis

Poor or Dangerous Conditions Highlighted in Lawsuit

On March 21, Fourth District Court Judge Deborah Bail ordered a dozen school buildings tested for heavy metal contamination caused by years of smelting operations in the Silver Valley area of Northern Idaho. *The Idaho Statesman* also reports that she also ordered a hearing on the condition of American Falls High School, a building that engineering reports show could collapse in an earthquake. Judge Bail's orders came as a result of testimony presented during a lawsuit on facilities funding brought against the state by 23 mostly rural school districts.

Bail's orders come in response to evidence presented in a case where 23 mostly rural school districts are suing the state to provide adequate funding of facilities.

Since Idaho became a state in 1890, the state government has left all school facilities issues in the hands of local school districts. Idaho requires local districts to pay for the entire cost of school construction. Local bond issues must be passed with a two-thirds majority vote.

In American Falls, where part of the high school dates back to 1934, residents failed to pass bond issues three times in the 1990s. The fear of collapse helped to get a $14 million bond passed last year. A new high school building is expected to open in two years. With Judge Bail's order, American Falls students may have to double up in the safer part of their current facility until then.

The school districts in the suit claim that Idaho is not acting on its constitutional duty of providing a "uniform and thorough" education system, which should include providing facilities. The most rural areas of the state are particularly affected by the current dependence on local taxes for school construction. The Associated Press reports that a new rural school could cost more than $200 a year on the property tax for a $100,000 home, compared with only a few dollars of tax on a home in a more urban, property-rich district.

Judge Bail's orders on safety measures take effect immediately and have the potential to impact some of the same districts that brought the suit. Her ruling on the case is expected in about a month.❖

Declining enrollment in North Dakota

A recent article in the *Grand Forks Herald* describes the effects of declining enrollments on North Dakota's schools. Seventeen school districts are facing declines of at least 20% over the next five years – a figure that is based only on birth rates and does not take into account the out-migration that rural school districts are experiencing. According to Tom Decker, director of school finance and organization for the State Department of Public Instruction, North Dakota will have more consolidations over the next two years than the state has had in the last ten years combined. Decker and others believe that the farm crisis of the 1980s is the cause of declining enrollments and out-migration.❖

Closing the Spending Gap

Pennsylvania Eyes Equity Finance Options

The Pennsylvania School Reform Network (PSRN) has calculated the spending gap between the top-performing schools in the state and what is spent in other districts. The analysis is based on performance on at least four of the eight state tests of reading, writing and mathematics in 1998-99. PSRN estimates that most districts spend an average of $45,200 less annually per classroom of 25 students than is spent in the top-performing schools. PSRN now reports that two bills have been introduced into the state legislature that offer hope of addressing this gap and providing a more equitable school finance system.

Hearings across the state are beginning this month on Senate Bill 1283 (Rhoades, R-Schuylkill). Known as the Fairness and Education Funding System bill, it contains a proposal by the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS), the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools, and the Association of School Districts in Support of Excellence in Education.

In the House, the Keystone Equity and Education Performance System (KEEPS) bill, House Bill 2106 (Colafella, D-Beaver), also proposes more equitable funding for all schools in Pennsylvania.

The bills have their differences, but both provide more funding for the state's most economically disadvantaged schools, both offer the opportunity to reduce or eliminate local school taxes and both also raise the state's share of funding by increasing the state income tax.

For more information on this legislation visit the Pennsylvania School Reform Network website at www.psrn.org or call their director, Tim Potts, at 717-238-7171.❖

RC 022629

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Matters of Fact

Colorado recognizes needs of small schools

In Colorado, state senators have approved a bill that would make it easier for small school districts to waive state education rules. In order to seek a waiver, districts must get approval from a majority of teachers, administrators and parents serving on school accountability committees. The bill affects 138 districts with populations of less than 3,000.

The debate over the Appalachian Rural Systemic Initiative

The Education Policy Analysis Archives has recently published two articles that take sides on the effectiveness of the Appalachian Rural Systemic Initiative, a program designed to improve student achievement in science and mathematics in rural Appalachian counties. "Top-Down, Routinized Reform in Low-Income, Rural Schools: NSF's Appalachian Rural Systemic Initiative" by Robert Bickel, Terry Tomasek and Teresa Hardman Eagle can be found at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n12.html. A rebuttal, "The Appalachian Rural Systemic Initiative: Improving Science and Mathematics Student Achievement in Economically Disadvantaged Rural Counties in Central Appalachia Through a School-Based, Teacher Partner Approach" by Stephen A. Henderson and Wimberly C. Royster can be found at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n17.

New learning for a new economy

What do innovative school reform models have in common? In "Schools That Think," Sarah Terry writes that successful models "emphasize the social dimensions of learning: the teamwork that it involves; that it's participatory and experiential; and that education – if it is like business – must shed its manufacturing mind-set and begin to operate as a service." In addition, "all of their work is done in partnership – teachers, students, principals, parents, and community members, all of them helping to shape a new vision of learning." Terry looks at four different models and argues that they provide students with what it takes to succeed in the new economy. The article is available at http://www.fastcompany.com/online/33/education.html.❖

Public Policy Principles of the Rural School and Community Trust

The Principles that guide the public policy work of the Rural Trust can be expressed as a series of conditions we seek to achieve and others we seek to avoid in rural public schools. Here's a sampling.

Conditions We Seek to Achieve Through Public Policy	Conditions We Seek to Avoid Through Public Policy
Children are engaged in the course of their academic program in public work that helps them understand the place in which they live and helps to build a stronger and better community in that place. They are prepared to be active, engaged citizens who can live well in any place they choose. They work with adults, both professional teachers and others.	Children sit in classrooms believing that the purpose of education is to improve oneself by escaping the place and community in which one lives.
Teachers are prepared to teach in a rural setting, open to community participation in the classroom, eager to engage their students in public work that builds community.	Teachers are trained to teach to the test, accommodate their classroom to rigid curricula imposed by state officials, resist the inclusion of non-professionals and local factors in the classroom, and are hostile to student work outside the classroom.
Teachers are given equal pay for equal work	Those who teach in rural areas are expected to sacrifice equal pay for doing so.
Every child's intellectual growth and academic success are valued both as personal achievements and as community assets. Learning standards are developed by the community a school serves, providing for (1) academic content that challenges each student, (2) use of the community and native place as curriculum, and (3) appropriate learning conditions including a safe environment, good facilities, and a community context.	Academic requirements are imposed from without, standardized across all locales, rigid in curriculum content and standardized in assessment. Achievement against high academic standards are viewed primarily as essential to a strong, competitive economy.

Field Work: Oldtown, Maryland

Citizens Fight to Save Community K-12 School

Oldtown, Maryland was established in 1740 on the site of a Native American settlement. Its original name was "King Oppessas Old Town." After 260 years of settlement, people in this rural Appalachian area are struggling to maintain the heart and soul of their community – their local school.

Nestled in the mountains of western Maryland's Allegany County, the Oldtown school serves 262 students, from Pre-Kindergarten (Head Start) through 12th grade. Operating a relatively small school in a sparsely populated area comes at a cost. The per-pupil expenditures are higher than in larger schools and that cost factor is driving the move to close Oldtown. Members of the Oldtown community see the benefits of their local community school, both in terms of student learning and as a community asset, as far outweighing the added costs. Unfortunately, the rest of the county doesn't necessarily see it that way.

The differences across the county are dramatic. The county is basically divided by the high ridges that run north-south. The Allegany County Zoning map shows a large area of green, zoned for land conservation, across much of the eastern portion of the county. This forested and mountainous area is home to Oldtown and other very small communities, as well as Green Ridge State Forest, and is predominantly a woodland and agricultural area. Only two of Allegany County's 24 schools, and a correspondingly smaller population and political base, are found in this eastern half. The majority of people in Allegany live in the population centers of Cumberland and Frostburg, to the west. Due to the population disparity, the school board is made up entirely of people from the western part of the county.

Oldtown is trying hard to save its small school and keep its students from being bused even farther to school over dangerous roads. It's not the first time they've fought to keep their school. After a devastating flood in 1985, Oldtown residents successfully fought off a consolidation battle, using federal disaster relief funding to help restore their school. They were also successful in getting unique state legislation passed that specifically limited the time Allegany County students would spend traveling on buses to and from school to one hour, one-way. Now, facing the rising tide of closure threats based on arguments of financial efficiency, they are fighting again. This time it's likely to end up in court.

Citizens have raised funds, hired a lawyer, and filed a suit claiming civil rights and constitutional law violations against the State of Maryland School Board, the State Superintendent and the local Allegany County School Board and Superintendent. As we go to press, they await a response and hope the case will be settled, but they are preparing their case.

The case hinges in part on the ability of Oldtown advocates to document the benefits of having a community school, and the potential loss their students would suffer from closing it. The case is similar in nature to one argued three years ago regarding the K-12 school in Circleville, West Virginia. In that case the West Virginia Supreme Court ruled that there was not sufficient cause to stop the consolidation of the high school grades from Circleville into a combined county school over the mountain. Today Circleville has a new K-8 school for its younger children. In the Oldtown situation, however, if the school is closed all the grades will be bused elsewhere.

Oldtown's school is the heart of its community. As Georgene McLaughlin, an Oldtown resident and education activist puts it: "The Oldtown school is the only public facility located in our town, besides the post office. There are no libraries, no senior centers, and everything centers around the activities there. We feel closing the school would destroy the community and make us just another site on a map to drive by."

For more information please contact Georgene McLaughlin at tigger@hereintown.net or 301.478.5548 ❖

Rural Education Working Group Meets in Southeast

The first gathering of a Rural Education Working Group organized by the Rural School and Community Trust was held in Birmingham, Alabama in mid-March. The 19 participants included community members, parents, advocates, and grassroots organizers from the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, the Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG), Georgia's Center for Children and Education, and the Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education.

The groups helped each other take an indepth look at their work, focusing on such issues as: how to do more effective parent and community training; how to design and use research; how to deal with internal organizational struggles; and how to balance working on policy at both the local level and the state level. In addition, these groups from the South identified state accountability plans as a major policy issue in their work and spent time together exploring that issue and sharing strategies.

Helen Johnson, who works with MEWG, commented: "I really liked the consultancy process as a way to investigate our work. I was a little skeptical at first but it was good to have others ask questions and comment on how we were doing things, and to listen and not have to justify or defend our work. I think we need to hear all ideas and remain flexible. Some groups have had experiences that others are just beginning to go though and we can help each other." Back in her home state of Mississippi, Johnson has already received advice and support from participants from other states as MEWG works on state accountability policy.❖

Please pass this newsletter on to friends, enemies, neighbors or co-workers.

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Publications Available

Both print and electronic versions of the following documents are available through our website, www.ruraledu.org or by calling the Policy Program office at 802.728.5899.

Small Works: School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement (February 2000). The results of a Rural Trust supported four-state study demonstrate that poverty's power over achievement can be substantially reduced in smaller schools. Summaries of the results are available for each state studied – Montana, Georgia, Texas, or Ohio – as well as a national summary.

School Boards: Leadership and Leadership Potential (June 1999), condenses the results of our survey of Executive Directors of State School Boards Associations.

Public School Standards: Discussing the Case for Community Control (March 1999). From November 1998 through February 1999, the Rural Trust hosted an online discussion of public school standards. This booklet of proceedings also contains the Rural Trust's statement on standards.

Standing Up for School and Community: Rural People Tell Their Stories, by Bradwell Scott, is an inspiring collection of profiles about people who have stepped forward in their public lives to work toward education reform.

Title I and Ed-flex: A Primer (April 1999), provides background on the debate over reauthorization of federal education legislation.

Long Rides, Tough Hides: Enduring Long School Bus Rides (April 1999), by Belle Zars, examines the increase in rural busing that has accompanied the consolidation of schools and points out neglected areas of research.

Parent Participation, School Accountability and Rural Education: The Impact of KERA on Kentucky School Facilities Policy (December 1998), by Alan J. DeYoung, provides a detailed discussion of the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

What Difference Do Local Schools Make? A Literature Review and Bibliography (September 1998), by Priscilla Salant and Anita Waller, surveys the substantial evidence of the positive benefits of keeping schools closely linked with communities.❖

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Rural Policy Matters

May 2000 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Declining Enrollment

Silent Killer of Rural Communities

Since 1984, U.S. public schools have been experiencing the effects of the Baby Boom echo and have seen steadily increasing school enrollments. According to U.S. Department of Education projections, the enrollment increases should continue through 2007. By then, total enrollment is expected to hit 54.4 million. Yet this growth, described as a "population explosion" by the U.S. DOE, has largely bypassed rural public schools. Instead, rural schools throughout the country are losing students.

Rural schools in every state have been facing declining enrollments, from a low of 20% of rural schools in Alaska to a high of 60% of rural schools in Louisiana,. In 22 states, more than half of all rural schools lost students between the 1994 and 1997 school years. The states with the highest percentages of rural schools with declining enrollments were Louisiana, Idaho, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming. In 14 states, more than half of rural schools with declining enrollments have lost 10% of their students between 1994 and 1997. Topping that list were Kentucky, New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Overall, in 26 states, more 20% of *all* rural schools experienced an enrollment decline of at least 10%. Kentucky, Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota, Montana, and South Dakota had the most schools with declines of at least 10%.

Where have all the students gone?

By most accounts, rural populations are growing. Most of the growth has occurred in rural "recreational" counties and those that have attracted retirees. Agricultural counties, those with high poverty rates, and those that are not adjacent to metropolitan areas have missed out on what has been called the rural rebound. Many rural counties are projecting declining enrollments in the coming years based solely on birth rates. These projections don't include the numbers of people leaving rural areas. In general, declining birth rates combined with rural out-migration have resulted in smaller numbers of students in rural classrooms. Some states, however, can relate their declines to more specific events. In North Dakota, where 57% of rural schools experienced declines between 1994 and 1997, the farm crisis of the 1980s and the ensuing out-migration of young families has left big gaps in the student population. In New Mexico, where more than one quarter of all rural schools have experienced declines of at least 10%, private school enrollment is on the rise as public school enrollment declines. In New Hampshire, where 18% of schools with declining enrollments have lost more than 20% of their students, restrictions on new home construction have discouraged growth in several communities.

What does this mean for rural schools?

Most school funding formulas are based on average daily enrollment or cost per pupil. When students leave schools, so does the money. For example, at the Dakota Prairie High School in North Dakota, the recent 48-student drop translates to a loss of more than $100,000 in state aid, based on the $2,200 per student revenues. Declining enrollments mean declining budgets, which leaves schools to decide on ways to cut expenses or raise revenues. More often than not,

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Georgia Adopts Major School Reforms

Parents and Grassroots Leaders Influence the Legislation

Georgia's parents had a significant impact on the historic school reform legislation enacted by Governor Roy Barnes and the General Assembly during this year's legislative session. The "A-Plus Education Reform Act of 2000," House Bill 1187, will change the face of public education in Georgia. The legislation responds to many of the demands for school reform raised by the Center for Children and Education (CCE) and its statewide coalition of parents and grassroots leaders from low income, minority, and rural Georgia communities.

Parents and grassroots leaders were involved in every step of the 10-month process of drafting and debating the school reform bill. They testified at public hearings in the Capitol and in seven cities around the state. They regularly contacted their elected representatives, held press conferences, and conducted local public meetings. CCE supported these activities by providing research, written materials, training conferences, telephone consultation, and coordination with influential organizations such as the NAACP of Georgia.

Initially, the CCE coalition found that it was alone in its willingness to publicly criticize Georgia schools for failing to provide equal access to academic success for all children. Parents and grassroots leaders were told that it was not necessary for school reform legislation to address the needs of low-income, minority,

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Declining Enrollment

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schools are forced to cut programs and/or staff. More dramatic, but not infrequent, measures include school closings, school consolidations, and district reconfigurations.

Some schools are taking different approaches. In Michigan, some schools are being turned over to for-profit management companies with the express goal of stemming the outflow of students. In Colorado, one district is considering reinventing a school with continuously declining enrollments as a specialty niche school with an emphasis on leadership skills. The hope is that the small school will be able to attract parents and students because of its size and unique offerings.

How are states responding?

While most of the struggles around declining enrollment seem to be occurring at the local level, several states have taken steps to try to ease the impact on schools. In Wisconsin, where 56% of rural schools have experienced declines and half of those schools have experienced losses of at least 10%, legislators have made adjustments to district revenues that allow districts to receive 75% of the money they would have received had their enrollments not decreased. In Iowa, where 21% of all rural schools have lost more than 10% of their students, a one-time funding boost was authorized. The Iowa School Finance Committee has recommended that, for districts with declining enrollments, funding be based on a three-year rolling average enrollment count and be supplemented with a district budget guarantee provision. In Minnesota, where half of all rural schools lost students between 1994 and 1997, both the House and Senate recently approved education finance bills that included provisions to ease fiscal losses for small districts with declining enrollments.❖

School Reforms

continued from page 1

or rural students. Many angry individuals and community groups then worked together to protest and raise the visibility of their concerns. Governor Barnes and key legislators responded by including in H.B. 1187 nearly 30 amendments that were requested by the CCE coalition. In addition, the Governor began speaking about the importance of using school reform to help all children learn.

In its final form, H.B. 1187 provides school reform advocates with important opportunities for positive school improvement. The bill enacts many education reforms already familiar in other states such as North Carolina and Texas. The centerpiece of the legislation is the creation of a new state agency called the Office of Education Accountability. This powerful new agency will measure individual school performance, publish results by race and class, reward improving schools, and require interventions for "failing" schools.

In addition, new curriculum-based standardized tests will measure student achievement in every grade. State law will hold teachers and schools accountable using the results of the standardized tests. Students will not be penalized for low scores on these tests, unless such "high stakes" penalties are imposed by local school systems.

Although other states claim improvement in student achievement based on similar school reforms, the results are controversial. For example, education standards may be lowered when teachers feel the pressure to teach only what is on the standardized test. Struggling schools may be weakened even further if students, teachers, and administrators try to leave the schools labeled by the state as "failing".

Several important reforms in H.B. 1187 give parents reason to hope that these mistakes can be avoided in Georgia. For example, class sizes will be reduced and strictly enforced. School Councils will be created in every school, giving parents real power over local reforms. Annual teacher evaluations now must include the factors of student achievement and parent communication. Professional development programs for teachers are expanded and tied to student achievement goals.

The school reform legislation increases funding to help all students succeed. The Equalization Grant program greatly increases funding for small, low-wealth school systems. Additional new funding allows every school to hire a nurse and at least one counselor. Funding is also increased for social workers, psychologists, and programs for students with limited English proficiency.

Two new programs will allow every school to provide help for students performing below grade level. The Early Intervention Program gives personal attention in reading, math, and other subjects to struggling students in kindergarten through third grade. The Extended Day/Extended School Year Program provides a total of 20 additional days of instruction after school, on Saturdays, between semesters, or during the summer for low-performing students in all grades and in all schools.

Parents and grassroots leaders know that they must get involved to fulfill the promise of Georgia's new school reform legislation. Without ongoing community involvement, school reforms are unlikely to benefit low-income and minority students. Parents must attend every local school board meeting. They must use the Open Records Act and the Open Meetings Act to monitor the implementation of new programs and policies. Parents must write their own proposals for school improvement and fight for local schools to adopt these ideas. By working together, communities can use H.B. 1187 to create a better future for all children. Brian Kintisch, Executive Director, CCE. For more information, contact the Center for Children and Education at PO Box 6255, Macon, GA 31208, 912.750.1007, GaSchools@aol.com.❖

Field Work: Camptonville, California

Young Students Help Change Course of River Debate

Camptonville is a tiny Northern California community located in the upper foothills between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe. It is home to the Middle Fork of the Yuba River, which is a popular recreation site during most of the year, but threatens our neighbors in the valley during the rainy season. After several destructive floods, the local water agency proposed a dam that would protect the valley even though it would flood Moonshine Road, the most populated area in the Camptonville region. The water agency acknowledged that would present a problem, but they found it preferable to continued threats of flooding in the much more populated valley. Camptonville residents were determined to prevent the dam from being built, so we attended meetings, formed an organization called MYRACL (Middle Yuba River Area Citizens League), and generated as much anti-dam publicity as possible but, when the consultants' report was released, it recommended the construction of Freemans Crossing Dam.

The battle against the dam proposal was almost exclusively fought by adults, but children were well aware of the threat to their community, and they were scared. Pam Wittler, the 4th/5th grade teacher was concerned about the effect this was having on her students, so she asked them if they would like to make a presentation to the governing board of the water agency to help them understand what the dam would do to Camptonville. The kids jumped at the opportunity, and brainstormed ways in which they could teach the board that destroying the homes on Moonshine Road would cause serious damage to the entire Camptonville community. The class outlined the best issues to emphasize, identified who would speak, and drew before and after pictures to be presented to the Board. A community member notified the Board that the class wanted to make a presentation and called local newspapers and a television station, all of which covered the meeting.

The students were wonderful. Four speakers approached the microphone, one by one, while all of the other students and their teacher sat earnestly in the front row, conveying the gravity of the subject through their demeanor. The last speaker concluded by individually identifying the members of the class who would be displaced if the dam were built. Several students slowly stood up, including the teacher, the school bus driver and several other Camptonville residents, creating a visual impact that affected everyone. When they finished, a Board member who had supported the dam proposal complimented them and thanked them for coming. Students were interviewed by reporters, photographed for newspapers, and filmed for what became a lead story on the evening news in Sacramento. The television crew was so impressed that they even followed them an hour up the hill to the little red schoolhouse that is the center of community in Camptonville.

Pam's students gave a face to the impact that a dam would have on this community, and that was enough to stop the momentum that the proposal had been gaining. The publicity helped encourage a small group of people in the valley to work with MYRACL to establish a collaborative relationship that could benefit both groups. In contrast to the polarization between foothill and valley interests that had been intensifying, this coalition agreed to work together to fight the dam and promote a ballot initiative that would provide the resources necessary to provide alternate forms of flood control. They succeeded in doing so, resulting in the passage of the initiative, a dam proposal that has become politically difficult to support, and a lesson to our children that cooperation is much more effective than confrontation.

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Matters of Fact

Making community count

Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development is a new report that describes the results of 12 years of conversations with rural and urban youth on what motivates them to participate in community-based organizations and how that participation affects them. The report supports the idea that community involvement is essential for complete student learning and for the development of a sense of civic responsibility. The report also makes recommendations for ways in which to engage the community in student learning. It is available through the Public Education Network at http://www.PublicEducation.org or by calling 202.628.7460.

Pesticides and schools

The Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides has released *Unthinkable Risk: How Children are Exposed and Harmed When Pesticides Are Used at School*, which documents 98 incidents in which students and school employees have been harmed by toxic pesticides at schools. The report includes details of incidents in California, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and 17 other states. The report is available online at http://www.pesticide.org or by calling 541.344.5044.

***Journal of American Indian Education* now online**

The articles from the first 30 years of the *Journal of American Indian Education* are now available for free online. The Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University has scanned 1,000 articles onto its web-site, which can be found at http://jaie.asu.edu.

***Digest of Education Statistics, 1999* now available**

The National Center for Education Statistics has recently released the *Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*. The Digest provides a compilation of statistical information covering the field of education from pre-kinder-

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Field Work

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This process helped elect a new supervisor from the valley who appreciates the power of collaboration and who is replacing our staunchest opponent. From our perspective, it seems evident that both Camptonville and Yuba County are much better off than they were a year ago. Pam's students made voters think about how the dam would affect people, and they did so in a manner that broke through the barriers that were created when adults spoke. They transformed themselves from victims of the water agency to defenders of their community, and discovered that even little voices can have a big impact.❖

Matters of Fact

continued from page 3

garten through graduate school and includes: the number of schools and colleges; teachers; enrollments; graduates; educational attainment; finances; federal funds for education; employment and income of gradu-ates; libraries; technology; and inter-national comparisons. The Digest is available online at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000031. For more information, call Charlene Hoffman at 202.219.1688.❖

"She figured out that traveling to and from the high school for four years, she went more than the distance around the world two times. That doesn't count the times she came home and went back to games. That was just regular everyday."

–parent of a Webster County, West Virginia student, speaking at hearings on busing held by Challenge West Virginia, a grassroots group supported in part by the Rural Trust. Get your copy of a report based on the hearings, *Long School Bus Rides: Stealing the Joy of Childhood,* by Beth Spence, by visiting the Challenge West Virginia website at http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv. For more information contact Beth Spence by e-mail to BandB58@aol.com or by calling 304.756.9191.

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Rural Policy Matters
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RPM 2.6

Rural Policy Matters

June 2000 — Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Pennsylvania: A State of Denial on School Funding

On May 4, without public hearings and without the chance for parents and taxpayers to object or applaud, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a sweeping law called the Education Empowerment Act. As Gov. Tom Ridge signed the bill into law on May 10, legislative leaders admitted to the press that they rushed passage of the legislation to avoid an expected backlash from the public. In Pennsylvania, one party controls the governor's office and both chambers of the legislature.

The law contains two major provisions. One creates a system of takeovers for school districts where students perform poorly on state reading and math tests for two years. The other permits all school districts, regardless of how well they are performing, to request waivers of hundreds of school laws.

What the law doesn't do, however, is address the unfairness of Pennsylvania's system for funding public education. This year in its "Quality Counts report, *Education Week* provided a preview of its new system for rating states' efforts to provide equitable funding. Pennsylvania's system received an F. (See "A New Approach to Measuring Equity," by Greg F. Orlofsky in Quality Counts 2000, available online at http://www.edweek.org/)

When the law takes effect in July, nine school districts will be required to create improvement plans that must be approved by the state and fully implemented within three to four years. Failure to achieve all of the improvement goals will result in a state "board of control" being appointed to replace the elected school board.

In two districts, including the Harrisburg school district, a board of control will be imposed immediately.

While all of the 11 districts are urban, they also have one additional factor in common: they are poor. Observers believe that it's just a matter of time before poor rural school districts also find themselves under the thumb of the state.

Takeovers

Boards of control have extraordinary powers. For example, they can declare any and all public schools to be "independent" schools (a term not defined in law) or charter schools and turned over to for-profit companies to operate. The boards – or the for-profit operators – can close entire schools, or substantial parts of schools, without public notice or public hearings. They also can operate without regard for many state laws designed to protect student health and safety, and can use taxpayer funds to build new schools that for-profit companies will own.

Waivers

The Empowerment Act permits all school districts – not just the 11 districts under various degrees of state control – to request waivers of *hundreds* of state laws and regulations. Among the laws that can be waived are:

- a prohibition against school board members demanding and accepting gifts and donations from school district employees
- the procedure allowing taxpayers to remove school board members who refuse to perform their duties
- the requirement for accounts and meeting records to be open to the public
- the requirement for notice of special meetings of the school board with limitations on the business to be

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New Vermont Standards

Sustainability and Understanding Place

In a move that may provide a fine example to other states, this spring the Vermont Board of Education approved new learning standards that emphasize sustaining Vermont's communities and environment. The Vermont Rural Partnership, a project funded in part by the Rural Trust, was among many organizations and individuals involved in building a coalition to support the additions to the "Vital Results" section of Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities.

The two standards are titled Sustainability and Understanding Place, and affect all grade levels, PreK-12.

"Education for sustainability" is defined in the Framework as education that "promotes an understanding of the interconnectedness of the economy, environment and society and pursues a balance among them."

The new Sustainability standard falls under the Personal Development category. It reads: "Students make decisions that demonstrate understanding of natural and human communities, the ecological, economic, political, or social systems within them, and awareness of how their personal and collective actions affect the sustainability of these interrelated systems."

Understanding Place is a new Civic/Social Responsibility standard: "Students demonstrate understanding of the relationship between their local environment and community heritage and how each shapes their lives."

Students, teachers, administrators, state agencies, and higher education officials all joined the sustained effort to lobby for the standards' approval.❖

Discipline Database Derailed

Citizen Action Halts Georgia Department Listings

In early April, the Center for Children and Education (CCE), based in Macon, Georgia, discovered relatively secret plans of the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) to create a statewide list of "bad" students. DOE spent more than $250,000 to develop a computerized database of "bad" kids receiving discipline in public schools. This system was recently activated, with initial data collection scheduled for July 1, 2000. The database would have personally identified the students, teachers, and administrators involved in all individual incidents of student misconduct, regardless of the severity of the rules violation. This new system threatened the privacy of students and teachers, in addition to creating the grave danger of public access to misleading information about students.

When confronted, DOE claimed that they were merely implementing the data collection statute passed in 1999, which CCE's network successfully drafted and fought to enact in the General Assembly. The statute (a section of H.B. 605) actually only requires DOE to publish an annual report about the aggregate total of different disciplinary actions (expulsion, suspension, etc.) by race, sex, and grade. The true purpose of the law is to document trends in discipline, including excessive punishment and racial inequities. We still do not know the motivation of DOE for "misinterpreting" this simple law and trying to collect individual student information instead of aggregate statistics.

CCE spent a week running around to file legal motions with the state board of education, getting grassroots parents and leaders to contact the state board members for their region, sending press releases, and generally raising the alarm. On April 13, Senator Vincent Fort made a presentation to the state board of education. The board ordered the staff to cease implementation of the discipline data collection system. The board also ordered the staff to comply with the simple requirements of the original data collection statute.

The activism of this grassroots network really paid off, as did the integration between community-level organizing and statewide friends such as the NAACP and ACLU.

–Brian Kintisch, Executive Director, CCE. For more information, contact the Center for Children and Education at PO Box 6257, Macon, GA 31208, 912.750.1007, GaSchools@aol.com. ❖

School funding

continued from page 1

conducted

- the requirement for school construction work to be bid competitively and awarded to the lowest responsible bidder
- the requirement for competitive bids for the purchase of equipment and supplies and to award contracts to the lowest responsible bidder
- the prohibition against bribing school directors to hire particular candidates as school administrators.

Hidden Agendas

The Ridge Administration has already signaled that it expects school districts to use waivers to cut costs, which will allow the state to continue to provide a smaller and smaller share of the total cost of public education. In 1974, the state provided 55% of the total cost of public education in Pennsylvania; today the state share is about 35%, resulting in ever-increasing local property taxes, especially in rural areas where there is little other wealth to tax.

There also appears to be a corporate connection to provisions in the law. Several laws that can be waived – for instance, the requirement for school funds to be deposited in school accounts with receipts and expenditures publicly reported monthly – appear to be motivated by corporate convenience.

For a description of the takeover law, visit http://www.psrn.org and click on the "Reports and Publications" page.

–Tim Potts, Executive Director, PSRN, 717.238.7171.

Collective Action Leads to NCAA Changes

"We've scored a major victory for educators and families." That's what Lloyd Styrwoll, superintendent of the Grand Rapids, Minnesota school district feels about a recent change in policy by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). It's been a four-year struggle, in which Annnenburg Rural Challenge/Rural Trust sites around the nation have been deeply involved. Four years ago, the NCAA, not having enough to do with regulating college sports, decided to tell high schools which courses were appropriate for college preparation. Some NCAA's standards were bizarre. For example, it rejected any Social Studies course that spent more than 25 percent of its time studying current issues. The NCAA also rejected many interdisciplinary high school courses, in which students spent time out in the community, doing research and service.

One hundred seventeen Minnesota high school counselors reported that they spent more than 2600 hours last year arguing with the NCAA, and filing out their forms – time that would be better spent working with students. Now, after four years and pressure from a number of folks involved in the Rural Trust, along with editorials blasting the NCAA in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* – the NCAA is changing its policy.

The NCAA announced in January that it will accept a high school's view about what represents appropriate college prep courses in English, Social Studies, Math or Science. The Center for School Change intends to work with others to monitor things into the future. But we're hopeful – and encouraged. Collective action can produce change – even when you're going up against a powerful organization like the NCAA.

–Joe Nathan, Director, Center for School Change. The Center for School Change, based in Minneapolis, helps increase school/community collaboration to increase student achievement and strengthen rural communities. For more information, e-mail jnathan @hhh.umn.edu, or call 612.626.1834. ❖

Playing Monopoly with Alaska's School Facilities

Critics Say Funding Unfair to Rural Areas

Alaska's legislature has passed a school construction bill that critics feel inadequately addresses the disparity between urban districts and poorer rural and Native Alaskan districts. In addition, efforts that would concentrate building contracts in the hands of urban firms have drawn fire.

Lawmakers are under pressure after last September's state supreme court ruling calling on them to rectify the funding inequity. Following the vote, Gov. Tony Knowles voiced concern that the bill will only fund $198 million of the $550 million he had called for in construction funds. Other estimates of the statewide need put the figure even higher.

The continuing tension between rural and urban was also evident when Eldon Mulder (R. Anchorage) submitted a separate but related construction bill too late in the session for discussion. Critics have voiced concerns that the legislation would funnel all construction work into one or two large, urban-based construction firms, potentially eliminating rural people entirely from the process of designing and building their own schools. Mulder defended his bill as "consolidating the way construction practices are handled...making all entities involved run more efficiently."

Lawmakers might think of efficiency as appropriate to the half of Alaska's people, many of them native, who live in remote rural areas. In *The Log School* (see *RPM* Jan. 2000), Barnhardt and Dubbs discuss the role community context can play in designing, building and maintaining Alaska's rural school facilities. They argue that schools should draw as much as possible on locally available materials, expertise, and energy sources.❖

Ohio Supreme Court Ruling

Reliance on Property Tax Not Sufficient

The Ohio Supreme Court ruled recently in favor of the plaintiffs in a nine-year-old case originally filed in rural Perry County. The plaintiffs claimed that reliance on the property tax does not provide a "thorough and efficient" education for children in the state as guaranteed under the Ohio State Constitution. Since 1991, a group of rural districts, joined eventually to form a powerful coalition of more than 500 districts, has forced the state to recognize its serious problem with inadequate school facilities and to offer partial solutions. Now that the current policy has been deemed unconstitutional, the state has until June 15, 2001 to develop a tax policy that addresses the issue and assures that every child has equal access.

Toward that end, the legislature created the School Facilities Commission and has ranked districts by wealth, funding projects in those with the greatest need. Poor districts are desperate to receive any funding, but concerned both about raising the local share and about heavy-handed design policies that force them to choose from a limited number of plans and often require closing small schools.

The Rural Trust has recently funded a project with Rural Action of Trimble, Ohio, an experienced community development organization with deep roots and commitment in southeastern Ohio. Rural Action will work with local districts to understand the impact of current facilities policy in rural Ohio and to help people think about ways in which schools and communities can work together to create the most effective facilities. For more information about Rural Action, visit http://www.ruralaction.org or call 740.767.4938.❖

Consolidation and Transportation

School Consolidation and Transportation Policy, by Kiernan Killeen and John Sipple of Cornell University, is a study tracing actual school transportation costs across states and the relationship between transportation and instructional costs . Since 1930, as the number of school districts has shrunk with consolidation from 120,000 to under 18,000 today, the percentage of students bused to school has increased from under 10 to nearly 60 percent. Costs of this transportation system have spiraled upward, remaining below $2 billion until the mid 1950s, (all figures adjusted for inflation), then doubling by 1970 and doubling again by the early 1980s. By the mid 1990s, total US spending on student transportation had reached more than $10 billion, and continues to rise.

Despite the assumption that larger schools lower per-pupil costs, the transportation costs actually escalate with increasing school size, according to Killeen and Sipple. As the number of children per school multiplied five-fold between 1930 and 1996, the per-pupil transportation cost actually doubled. These problems are particularly severe in rural areas, where per-pupil transportation costs are double urban costs, and where transportation's share of total current spending on instruction is 77% higher than in urban areas.

For more on this study, visit the policy section of http://www.ruraledu.org❖

Rural Roots Newsletter Available Soon

The Rural School and Community Trust has developed a new publication, *Rural Roots*, which will regularly explore the practice of making school and community connections work. Those of you who had previously received our first newsletter, *Rural Matters*, will be receiving *Rural Roots* soon. If you never received that earlier newsletter but would like to receive *Rural Roots* as well as *Rural Policy Matters*, please give a toll free call to our DC office, 877.955.7177 or drop us a note at info@ruraledu.org.❖

Worth Reading...

Exposing the Gap – Why Minority Students Are Being Left Behind in North Carolina's Educational System, is a policy report recently released by the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center. *Exposing the Gap* documents a wide and persistent gap in achievement between minority and white students and urges state officials to make ending that gap the state's top education priority.

The gap is dangerous because North Caroline is one of the most aggressive testing states, determined to use test results to hold schools and teachers accountable by rewarding high test scores and punishing low test scores. Minority students are not prepared to compete in this high stakes testing system, the report warns.

The report notes that while 80 percent of the state's white students are performing at grade level in both reading and math, only 48 percent of its African-American students are. The gap appears consistently in SAT scores, dropout rates, student long-term suspension rates, placement in academically gifted (less minority placement) and special education programs (more minority placement). The report provides detailed data for every school system in the state. It makes a host of concrete recommendations for action, including smaller schools, local task forces, and more minority teachers.

North Carolina is one of the nation's most rural states, with half its population living in places of under 2,500. Nearly one-third of the students who go to rural schools are minorities.

Check it out at http://www.ncjustice.org or order from the NC Justice and Community Development Center at P.O. Box 28068, Raleigh, NC 27611, 919 856.2570.❖

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Rural Policy Matters

July 2000

A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action

Colorado Charters: An Antidote for Consolidation?

The charter school idea has helped several rural Colorado communities avoid unnecessary and ill-advised school consolidation. Rural school consolidation, a popular trend during America's industrial age that continues today, has left hundreds of rural Colorado communities without local educational autonomy. Although most rural towns in Colorado have their own historic one-room or two-room schoolhouses, for decades residents of these remote towns have been forced to send their children out of town to attend school, with bus rides as long as three or four hours per day. The schools their children attend are typically in larger rural towns that serve as the central consolidated school district headquarters for a large geographic area.

In the past five years, however, seven remote Colorado communities with seldom heard names like Guffey, Marble, and Paradox have broken through the inequities of school consolidation. Using the Colorado Charter School Act, they gained the right to retain and operate their own local school as a charter.

The town of Marble, located next to the spectacular Maroon Bells wilderness area, was one of the first rural Colorado communities to take advantage of the charter school law. Marble residents filed a charter application with their home district in Gunnison, which is separated from Marble by nearly 100 miles of winding road that travels over a 10,000 foot mountain pass. Marble wanted to re-open their historic school building and provide a local school for Marble children. The charter was approved, and eighteen children started their first day of school at the K-8 Marble Charter School in September, 1995.

The students were not only saved from long bus rides, but they were allowed to learn and grow in their own community. The top floor of their two-story building doubles as the town museum, where students serve as docents, teaching local Marble history to tourists. Marble students also monitor the nearby Crystal River, reporting their results regularly to the Division of Wildlife. The students have joined with the community to build the town ice hockey rink and the town playground. There are even current plans underway for a student-run town store. This is big news for a town that has had no place to buy items like bread and milk.

Similar results have developed in the town of Guffey, located at 9,000 feet in the foothills southwest of Pikes Peak. Threats of school closure from the district headquarters in Fairplay prompted the local Guffey citizens to apply for a charter for their K-6 school. Not only did they save their younger children from 50 mile bus rides to the Fairplay school, but they included in their charter plans for the development of a 7th and 8th grade extension.

The Guffey Community Charter School began with 19 students K-6.

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Rural Minnesota's Charter Schools

The Minnesota charter law has helped small rural communities create new innovative schools, and retain strong public schools which otherwise were in danger of being consolidated. This would have forced youngsters to go many miles from home, and might well have been the end of their innovative practices.

The Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) in Henderson, Minnesota is frequently cited as another example of a newly chartered school that is contributing to the economic vitality of its community as well as offering a distinctive educational choice for rural students. The school, started in 1994, is a secondary school, with a project-based curriculum serving 150 students, grades 7-12, who come from ten different districts. MNCS is located on the Main Street of Henderson, population 900.

Many of the projects MNCS students complete are drawn from community resources and local folks contribute their talents and knowledge to help students. The study of local issues and natural resources is a major focus of the school. The discovery of deformed frogs near the school five years ago has resulted in a major research project and extended to other outdoor studies. The school has received several awards and much recognition for their research.

The school also serves as a

continued on page 2

Editor's Note:

The Rural School and Community Trust is committed to public schools that are well-rooted in the communities they serve. We believe those schools should be governed by the people they serve, and that those people should accept the responsibility to govern well. Within the Rural Trust "family," which includes 750 affiliated local schools and many rural education activists and organizations, there are many perspectives about how best to achieve these governance goals. Some feel strongly that chartered public schools can serve rural communities well. These articles, written by Rural Trust board member Ginny Jaramillo and former Rural Challenge Steward, Doug Thomas, both long time charter school advocates and activists, reflect that view. They do not necessarily reflect the view of the Rural Trust as a whole. We welcome the thoughts of these writers and invite comments by others.

Colorado Charters

continued from page 1

The school is currently anticipating a fall 2000 enrollment of 45 students from preschool through 8th grade.

Guffey, like Marble and other rural Colorado charter schools, fosters community awareness and action among its students. Guffey students publish the only local news source, the Eye on Guffey, an all-color 24 page news magazine that keeps the entire community informed of events and news occurring in the area. Other Guffey students are researching high altitude winter gardening using a solar pod which they have constructed with help from local community mentors.

The fact that rural charter schools like Guffey and Marble consistently score far above state averages on state-wide standards-based assessments is significant. But perhaps more significant is the fact that these schools serve as the heart of their communities, teaching students the responsibility of community ownership and sustainability.

The story is not as happy for many other rural towns, like Idalia, a small town in the Eastern Plains of Colorado. The Idalia School is still under the governance of the East Yuma School District which is housed 30 miles away in the rural town of Wray. Idalia residents have donated years of time and money to the Idalia School, and yet the Idalia facilities, staff, curriculum, budget, calendar, are all still determined by the school board in Wray. Idalia families are hoping to succeed in the long and tedious political process of district de-consolidation through a district-wide vote in November, 2000.

If those efforts fail, however, they have another option now. They can create their own local governing board under the Colorado Charter School Law. In this state, the charter idea is helping rural families, students and communities.—*Ginny Jaramillo*
For more information contact the Colorado Rural Charter Schools Network P.O. Box 11, Lake George, CO 80827 (719) 748-3055 or e-mail: osolee@aol.com❖

Minnesota Charters

continued from page 1

technical resource for the community. Originally billed as the first "computer infused" high school in the state, New Country has totally integrated technology into its program and offers technology training to the community. The school is open year round with extended hours in order to be accessible to the public. In addition, students offer their technical knowledge to help local businesses with technical problems, training and website designs. Economically, the school has brought a million dollar business back to Main Street. The local high school was consolidated and closed in 1991 and when the opportunity to attract and maintain another public high school came about, the community was excited. Many local people invested in the construction and eventual lease of the new building built near the downtown business district that houses the New Country School. When asked about that investment they readily will tell you it was well worth it for the community. It has strengthened the local economy, brought youth back to the community and contributed to a general spirit of optimism and activity around town.

Before Nerstrand's Elementary School converted to charter status, families and faculty were worried that the school board would consolidate its 160 students into other schools. Nerstrand is a model of multi-age classrooms, service learning, and intense respect for community elders and the environment. But the school's teachers voted to convert to charter status, allowing it to continue to be a model and giving the faculty and families autonomy and independence."

One parent recently slept on the sidewalk in order to make sure he could get his son admitted to the school for the following year. Community members regularly visit the school and local community elders are honored each year for their contributions to the school and town. One elder recently stated, "Chartering has meant everything to us. We always knew it was a great school but now we have our school back again!"

Like Nerstrand, the Hanska elementary school was part of a larger district which was considering consolidating its elementary schools. Hanska is arguably the Norwegian cultural hub of southern Minnesota.

Formerly controlled by the New Ulm district, the German cultural hub of the state, Hanska is host to the largest Syttende Mai festival and talent show in Minnesota. Children as young as three years old learn Norwegian dancing and the students of the Hanska Community Charter School dance with the adults in the "big show". With their independence through chartering, the Hanska community has a new lease on their cultural heritage and are virtually guaranteed a steady supply of future dancers. The school specializes in music and technology so coming together around the annual performance is a natural. Like many small towns across the country, Hanska has an identity it wants to preserve and wants to include its young people as a part of that identity. —*Doug Thomas, Henderson,Minnesota*
Visit these schools on the web: Minnesota New Country School at mncs.k12.mn.us; Nerstrand Elementary School at www.faribault.k12.mn.us/ner/ ❖

New Policy Publication Available

A new publication is currently available in hard copy and coming soon to our website. *Standards in Public Schools: A Policy Statement of the Rural School and Community Trust*, March 2000, is the final version of a statement that has been under public discussion for two years. Contact our Policy Program Office at 802.728.5899 to request your copy.

Rural Charter -Research

There are very few research studies that focus and evaluate the impact of charters for rural areas. However the following sources offer divergent perspectives and links to other references that may be helpful in understanding the potential of this policy.

The Changing Face of Public Education. Five part series in *Education Week*, April 26, 2000, May 3, 2000, May 10, 2000, May 17, 2000, and May 24, 2000. *Education Week* is available online at http:/www.edweek.org.

How are school districts responding to charter laws and charter schools? A study of eight states and the District of Columbia, by Eric Rofes. April, 1998. For a copy of this report contact Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), 3653 Tolman Hall, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1670, call 510.642.7223, email:PACE123@socrates.berkeley.edu, or on the web at http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE/pace.html.

Special Section on Charter Schools in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June, 2000, Vol. 81, No. 10. Three articles presenting divergent views of charter schools. Contacts for Kappan are http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm or P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402, email to kappan@kiva.net, or order by calling 800.766.1156.

Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California School Districts. UCLA Charter School Study by Amy Stuart Wells. December, 1998. A copy of this report can be obtained by contacting UCLA, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521 or e-mail: charter@gseis.ucla.edu.

Charters: Raising Questions

Most discussions and research about charter schools illuminate several "sticky" policy areas, that can either have very negative impact on students, existing public schools and communities, or conversely, very positive impact.

The following outlines the major areas of controversy, and presents some of the questions that frame the policy debate. The attempt here is not to resolve these controversies, but to acknowledge them and to illustrate the range of concerns about charter school policies.

1. Accountability. What agency grants the charter? What are the expectations for charter schools? What kind of, or level of, oversight is prescribed in state statutes? Do the citizens in the community have a role in the governance of charters?

2. Funding. Does public funding for charter schools make overall funding for public schools more or less equitable? Where is that money coming from? Does the money to operate charter schools come from funds previously targeted to existing public schools and, if so, does that create problems for these schools?

Whose Choice? Report of Ohio school choice (including charters) by Dennis J. Willard and Doug Oplinger, investigative reporters for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 1999. Report is available at http://www.ohio.com/bj/projects/whose_choice.

Ethnic Segregation in Arizona Charter Schools by Casey D. Cobb and Gene V. Glass. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Volume 7 Number 1, January 14, 1999, available at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n1/.❖

3. Student achievement. Do these charter schools do a good/better job of educating their students? Are charters required to participate in statewide assessment? Is this positive or negative? What is known, thus far, about student academic achievement?

4. Teacher certification. Are charters required to hire certified teachers? Is this positive or negative? How does the issue of requiring teacher certification affect financing, instructional quality, innovation etc.?

5. Special education. Are charters required to serve, and capable of serving, children with special needs? Are the needs of all children being adequately met? How successful are charters for "at-risk" students? Are specialized charters for certain populations re-segregating children with special needs?

6. Socio-economic inequity. Will, or do, charters disproportionally attract and serve children from certain socio-economic classes? Will charters contribute to social class segregation? Is there a "creaming effect?" Are the best students and most involved parents siphoned off? Does this offer too easy a quick "exit" for parents who might be otherwise involved in working for school improvement in local community schools?

7. Parental involvement. Are parents more actively involved in charter schools than in public schools? To what extent are charter schools requiring "parental contracts?" Is this a deterrent for some disadvantaged parents?

8. Innovation. To what extent are charter schools models for innovative education?

9. Scale. Can entire school districts be chartered, gaining the advantages of greater flexibility that individual charter schools now have? ❖

Matters of Fact

Making community count

Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development is a report that describes the results of 12 years of conversations with rural and urban youth on what motivates them to participate in community-based organizations and how that participation affects them. The report supports the idea that community involvement is essential for complete student learning and for the development of a sense of civic responsibility. The report also makes recommendations for ways in which to engage the community in student learning. It is available through the Public Education Network at http://www.PublicEducation.org or by calling 202.628.7460.

Pesticides and schools

The Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides has released *Unthinkable Risk: How Children are Exposed and Harmed When Pesticides Are Used at School*, which documents 98 incidents in which students and school employees have been harmed by toxic pesticides at schools. The report includes details of incidents in California, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and 17 other states and is available online at http://www.pesticide.org or by calling 541.344.5044.

***Journal of American Indian Education* now online**

The articles from the first 30 years of the *Journal of American Indian Education* are now available for free online. The Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University has scanned 1,000 articles onto its website, which can be found at http://jaie.asu.edu.

***Digest of Education Statistics, 1999* available**

The National Center for Education Statistics has released the *Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*. The *Digest* provides a compilation of statistical information covering the field of education from pre-kindergarten through graduate school and includes: the number of schools and colleges; teachers; enrollments; graduates; educational attainment; finances; federal funds for education; employment and income of graduates; libraries; technology; and international comparisons. The *Digest* is available online at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000031. For more information, call Charlene Hoffman at 202.219.1688.

Rural Policy Matters
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Rural Policy Matters

~~January~~ August 2000 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Court Upholds School Closure

Allegany County, Maryland Activists Change Focus

After losing a long-fought battle to maintain their small community schools, residents in portions of mountainous Allegany County, Maryland are working hard to turn their loss into a community gain. The county's consolidation plans will close its top performing elementary school and pull high school students out of all three K-12 schools, two of which will become K-6 or K-8 facilities. The third K-12 school, in Oldtown, will be closed. Oldtown residents are already working on plans to create a learning, business, and service center in the old school, preserving it as a vital hub of their community life.

The county has been divided on the fate of the schools for years, culminating in the recent school board vote turning down a $1 million state funding offer to allow time for a performance audit of the schools. The local board, which is dominated by members from the more populous western side of the county, cited fiscal difficulties as the reason for restructuring. As the *Baltimore Sun* reported on July 26, 2000, Allegany currently pays the lowest teacher salaries in the state. The board's lawyer, Gary Hanna, was quoted as saying: "We have given all of the students the chance to participate in a kindergarten-to-fifth-grade, middle school, and high school situation. We have come into the 20th century."

Some local activists would rather see a move into the 21st century by maintaining the types of community-oriented small schools that current research demonstrates could be more effective at educating the region's poorer students. The court decision upholding the board vote comes as the final chapter in a 15-year struggle by local education activists working to save their schools. Through their efforts, activists have managed to get a state bill passed limiting the time children must spend on school buses. Today they are focusing their attention on making the best use of the Oldtown school building, now in the control of the County Commission.

According to long-time activist Georgene McLaughlin, the Oldtown school is the only public building in that part of the county that is available for children's activities. With the community's plans for continued programming there, the school building will remain the glue holding Oldtown together. Plans for the Oldtown school include creating a combination community and small business center. The building may eventually house the Head Start program, child or adult day care, or a local library. Through a partnership with the local community college, courses including computer applications, Spanish, horticulture, the Science of Plants, Income and Payroll Tax keeping, CPR training, and others will hopefully continue at Oldtown.

Oldtown residents are open to hearing ideas from other communities who have faced similar transitions in the use of their school buildings. For more information, please contact Georgene McLaughlin by email to tigger@hereintown.net or by calling 301.478.5548.❖

Iowa's Diverse Rural Communities Facing "White Flight"

The *Des Moines Register* (7/27/2000) reports that two of the most diverse school systems in Iowa—West Liberty and Columbus Community School District—are losing white students as parents pull them out. Both districts have 40% or more minority populations. An open enrollment policy combined with growing populations of non-whites in small agricultural towns is blamed for the shift. Such "white flight" is usually associated with inner cities, not rural areas, potentially a disturbing trend for newly diverse rural communities.

Each student who leaves a system takes with them essential state funding dollars. *Register* reporter Colleen Krantz points out that this situation is "compounded by the corresponding need for extra services, such as teaching English as a second language, to serve the growing number of minority students."

Just when these systems need the money the most, it leaves. West Liberty is losing 5% of its student population, and superintendent Lee Hoover points out that only five of the 70 students leaving are non-whites. Hoover is quoted as saying "When you are talking about in excess of $4,000 per (departing) student, we are talking about $250,000 less next year."❖

Creating Schools as Centers of Community

Community involvement in schools can begin with the design of the facilities themselves. This was the message reinforced at a recent workshop in New Orleans co-hosted by the Rural Trust and Concordia, Inc. The Concordia-Rural Trust Workshop: Creating Schools as Centers of Community, brought together people from throughout the country with a wide range of interests and experience including service on school boards, in community development organizations, in education, business, health, and government, who all shared a commitment to education. People from states including Maine, Mississippi, Louisiana, Idaho, South Carolina, California, New Hampshire, Ohio, West Virginia, Texas and Alabama, joined together to identify the challenges they face in school facilities work, the assets in their communities, their goals and the tools they need to do the work.

The grassroots participants, not outside experts, provided the substance of the workshop, reflecting the belief that the strength and wisdom shared in communities is the most important resource. Participants first identified topics they wanted to explore: citizen engagement, resistance to change, tools for thinking "out of the box," alternative forms of education and their impact on facilities, and systemic planning.

Common problems were identified:

- policies that require a minimum number of students in a facility (350 for Ohio, for example);
- policies that require a degree of racial integration not possible in a poor and homogenous area;
- policies that discourage renovation in favor of new construction; and
- policies that by their design or implementation deny local people a voice in planning and designing their school-community facilities.

Even the concept of a facility that serves the needs of students and teachers as well as the community is still unheard of in many places.

As activists working on planning issues, the participants found they share similar fears as well: fear of the unknown, of being first to raise new ideas, of going counter to the culture of "bigger is better." Then there are the challenges of citizen apathy, the tendency to defer to "experts," the lack of interest from boards and citizens in long-term planning, and the pressures of rapidly changing demographic patterns. The political structure is often a challenge both because power and habits are entrenched and hard to change and because there is tension between the short periods of service of a school board member, for example, and the complexity of issues.

Even with these constraints, participants found solutions. For example, the community of Littleton, New Hampshire has been getting the members of the local school board and board of selectmen to meet together to consider issues such as the budget.

Concordia, Inc. is known for its innovative work helping communities plan and design school-community facilities. Steven Bingler of Concordia, a noted architect, was the first person to interest Secretary of Education Richard Riley in the concept of schools as centers of community, and helped plan the first Symposium on Schools as Centers of Community, which the Department of Education held in the fall of 1998. Bingler was instrumental in developing the *Six Principles of School Design* approved at the symposium, which the Secretary reaffirmed in October of 1999 (see Resources in next column for more on these principles).

For more information on facilities planning, contact Barbara Lawrence by email to barbara.lawrence @ruraledu.org or call 617.547.3666.❖

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Resources for Community Planning of School Facilities

Planning Schools for Rural Communities
By Hobart Harmon, Craig Howley, Charles Smith, Ben Dickens, Appalachia Educational Laboratory.

This guide provides rural communities with a useful structure for thinking about the work ahead when they are planning a school-community facility. Includes a useful checklist and references to other resources. Find it on the web at http://www.ael.org/rel/rural/papers/planning.htm or call AEL at 800.624.9120.

A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools
National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The National Trust is currently surveying selected states to assess the impact of state facilities policies on older schools. They realize that in many states facilities policy discourages renovation, which has resulted in the loss of many fine older buildings. This guide is available from the National Trust by ordering online at http://www.nthp.org or by calling 800.944.6847.

Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens Guide For Planning and Design.
U.S. Dept. of Education, April 2000.

This detailed guide outlines the six principles for designing and planning new schools that grew out of the National Symposium on School Design held in October of 1998. Provides citizens with ten examples of innovative school designs and outlines a step-by-step process for how parents, citizens and community groups can get involved in designing new schools. 55p. Available as a PDF download, online at http://www.ed.gov/inits/construction/ctty-centers.html or call 877.433.7827.❖

Matters of Fact

Rural Colorado students missing out on free meals

According to a recent article in *The Denver Post*, fewer than one in eight students eligible for free meals in Colorado are receiving those meals in the USDA's summer meal program. School officials blame the gap on the high cost of busing rural students to schools for free breakfasts and lunches. With rural students living so far from the schools they attend, it is time consuming and expensive for rural schools to bus those in need.

New study on school facilities

The National Center for Education Statistics is taking a look at public school facilities in its new report, *Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999*. The report finds that schools in rural areas and small towns are more likely than schools in urban fringe areas and large towns to report that at least one of their environmental conditions is unsatisfactory (47% compared with 37%). Fifty-two percent of rural and small town schools reported having at least one building feature in less than adequate condition. In 23% of the rural and small town schools, that means life safety features like sprinklers and fire alarms. The full report can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000032 or by calling 202.502.7300.

Jack and the Giant School

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance features small schools on the cover of its latest quarterly journal, *The New Rules*. In her article, *Jack and the Giant School*, Stacy Mitchell, points out the intertwined relationship between local schools and the economic and social health of communities, both rural and more urban. You can view the story online at http://www.newrules.org/generic_pages/nrsum00schools.htm or call the Institute for Local Self-Reliance at 612.379.3815.

Rural Nebraska schools lose funding

Since the Nebraska legislature introduced a new school funding plan in 1997, 38 small, rural school districts have lost more than $9 million in state aid. The Center for Rural Affairs reports in *Big Trouble for Small Schools II* that these school districts spend less per student than larger districts and have graduation rates that are 10% higher than the state average, yet are now at risk for closure or consolidation. For more information, contact the Center for Rural Affairs at www.cfra.org or 402.846.5428.

Teacher salaries in the states

A new report by the American Federation of Teachers examines trends in teacher salaries in every state. While the report does not specifically address any pay disparity between rural and non-rural teachers, it finds that the states with the lowest teacher salaries are Louisiana, Montana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, North Dakota, and South Dakota–all rural states. The report can be found online at http://www.aft.org/research/survey99/index.html or by calling 202.879.4400.❖

Alaska Plays Monopoly

As reported in the *Anchorage Daily News* on July 9, Alaska Governor Tony Knowles vetoed Bill 445 proposed by Rep. Eldon Mulder, R-Anchorage. Bill 445 would have established a pilot program allowing firms to bid for multiple projects in several districts instead of for individual districts. A critical view would also reveal that the bill could funnel school construction projects to companies meeting criteria developed with the advice of one of the largest firms in Alaska–the one firm that met all the requirements. Knowles called the bill "well-intentioned," because Rep. Mulder had hoped his bill would "produce firm proposals and timely completion of rural schools by having one developer oversee an entire project." Gov. Knowles stated that Bill 445 would have delayed several projects now designed and ready for bidding by a full year as construction is seasonal, which is a good reason for vetoing the bill, but not the right one.

Overruns in time and cost have affected many school construction projects throughout the country. A recent two-part series in the *Boston Globe* highlights some of the issues, such as the requirement that districts accept the lowest bid. Too often contractors bid artificially low and cover costs through excessive charges on change-orders. In some states outright graft and mismanagement have drained state and district assets. However, solutions, such as using one model of school design in North Carolina, ignore the savings gained from designing with local materials, fitting the plan to the land rather than the land to the plan, and long-term reduction in utility consumption gained by thoughtful siting. Bills like 445 ignore local history, culture, economy, and environment, and offer only a promise of savings based on "economies of scale," that elsewhere have proven false.❖

Activists Gather at Rural Trust Rendezvous

Beautiful Flagstaff, Arizona served as the setting for the Rural Trust's gathering of nearly 250 rural education activists, teachers, students and community members in late July. The participants ranged from experienced educators with years of practice in learning focused on local curriculum, to activists concerned with the conditions of rural schools, to school board members curious about "place-based education," to students actively involved in substantial public work.

Dozens of sessions developed and run predominantly by the participants themselves covered such topics as grassroots organizing, economic development, high stakes account-ability, technology, standards and assessments, science and place-based learning, student journalism, research and indigenous education, and community involvement in school design.

Based on feedback from the participants, the Rural Trust and partner organizations are working on plans for future gatherings at the regional level.❖

Rural Trust Position Openings

The Rural School and Community Trust is seeking applicants for two positions in its rural education Policy Program. Positions are open until October 1, 2000 or until filled.

Field Organizer

The Field Organizer will work with a small policy program team to support grassroots groups in a dozen states in their organizing and policy work by providing tailored technical assistance and networking opportunities with other grassroots groups engaged in similar work. The organizer will manage a portfolio of grants and contracts that support some of these organizations with funding; may develop new projects in one or two selected states; and will work with other groups not supported by grants and contracts. The new position will also work closely with the Rural Trust's Capacity Building program, which works directly to improve school practice in rural communities, in various joint efforts to improve both practice and policy.

State Policy Monitor

The Policy Monitor will be responsible for monitoring and reporting on the condition of rural education and on state policies affecting rural schools and communities. The Policy Monitor will continuously refine and develop our policy evaluation instrument and design and implement a participatory research approach engaging citizen activists, officials, and various professionals in an assessment of state policies. They will work with other Policy Program staff members to interpret the results of this research and provide the public with useful communications outreach regarding rural education policy.

For both of these positions field experience is essential. Location is flexible but candidates should be comfortable working unsupervised in a virtual office environment requiring substantial reliance on computers. Extensive travel time is anticipated.

For more information and application guidelines, please visit our website at www.ruraledu.org/jobs.html❖

Why Rural Matters

On August 28th the Rural Trust will release a compilation of data on rural America from a wide variety of sources. Taken together, the data in *Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education* suggest that rural education is far more important than Americans would think from listening to the education policy debate, and that specific policy attention to rural school needs is critical in many states. Watch *RPM* for more information.

Rural Policy Matters

RPM 2.8 **August 2000**

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Rural Policy Matters

RPM 2.9

September 2000 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

Why Rural Matters

Gauging Importance and the Need for Action in Each State

How important is rural education to the educational performance of each state, and how urgent is it that policy makers in each state give explicit attention to rural education? For the first time ever, national data that address these questions are compiled and analyzed in a report by the Rural School and Community Trust. The report suggests an urgent need for policy makers to pay attention to rural education issues across the United States.

Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education taps data on rural America from a wide range of sources. Eight statistical indicators are used to gauge the relative "importance" of rural education in each state, and 11 indicators are used to measure the "urgency" with which legislators in each state should address rural education in an explicit policy.

The report is geared to state-level education policy makers and the rural people they serve. It aims to shed light on the circumstances of the one-fourth of America's school-age children who attend public schools in rural areas or small towns.

The "Top 10" States for Importance and Urgency

Ten states in the Deep South, Appalachia, and the Great Plains lead in the overall rankings of "importance" and "urgency." They are Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and West Virginia. These states are in regions that are chronically depressed, suffer large areas of out-migration, and are deeply distressed by changes in the global economy. Six of these states rank in the top 10 in rural student poverty, and all rank in the top one-third in at least six of the urgency indicators. Declining enrollment in schools is widespread in these states, teacher pay is consistently low, rural adults have low levels of educational attainment, and communities rank low in the Educational Climate Index, a measure using income, educational attainment, and occupation as indicators of socioeconomic status.

Just because there is a "top 10," however, does not mean that rural education is unimportant in the other 40 states. No matter where a state scores on these gauges, the report advises, every child—including every rural child—is important, and every state can improve the policy climate within which its rural schools operate. While the rankings in this report are useful in identifying states where rural education is paramount to good schooling, they are also useful in identifying states where rural communities' educational needs may be unjustly lost in the political shuffle of state politics. "No child deserves to be lost in the shuffle," the report cautions.❖

How To Order Why Rural Matters

Parts of the report are available on our website at http://www.ruraledu.org. You can order the full printed version for $10 per copy by sending an email to whyruralmatters@ruraledu.org, including your name, mailing/billing address, and the number of copies you would like to receive, or by calling our national office at 202.955.7177.

Some Discoveries From Our Research

1. One-fourth of U.S. schoolchildren go to schools in rural areas or small towns of less than 25,000 in population. Fourteen percent go to school in even less populated places with fewer than 2,500 people.
2. Rural people are so widely dispersed that they are politically invisible. They are a demographic and political majority in only five states—Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia—and a handful of congressional districts.
3. Even in states with a numerically large rural population, rural people are often a particularly small demographic minority. California has 2.2 million rural people—more than all but seven states—but these people constitute less than 8% of California's population.
4. Rural America is as diverse as urban America, especially among the young. Minorities constituted 17% of all rural residents in 1997. Well over one-third of the rural population of each of the four minority groups was under age 18 in 1997, compared with only one-fourth of the rural white population.
5. Rural America is far poorer than metropolitan areas as a whole, and nearly as poor as central cities. Of the 250 poorest counties in America, 244 are rural.
6. Poverty is especially prevalent among rural minorities. In fact, if you are African-American, your chances of living in poverty are greater if you live in rural America than if you live in the inner city.
7. Some of our most urban states are also our most rural states:
   - Only 1 in 10 New Jerseyans lives in a rural place, but that's more rural people than there are in Maine, where more than half the population lives in rural places.
   - A higher percentage of Pennsylvanaians live in rural places than Kansans.❖

Indicators of "Importance" and "Urgency" Used in *Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education*

Importance Indicators

- Percentage of the state's population living in rural places
- Number of people living in rural places
- Percentage of public schools in rural areas
- Percentage of students enrolled in rural schools
- Percentage of rural students who are minorities
- Ratio of the average number of rural students to the average number of grades in rural schools
- Percentage of all students who attend small rural schools
- Percentage of rural children in poverty

Importance Gauge Cumulative Rankings*

How important is it to the overall educational performance of each state to explicitly address the particular needs of schools serving its rural communities?

Crucial		Very Important		Important		Useful	
SD	12.5	AK	18.5	TX	25.0	AZ	31.6
AR	13.3	IA	19.0	VA	25.0	CA	32.4
ND	13.8	LA	19.5	MN	25.1	FL	32.8
MS	14.0	NE	20.0	GA	26.4	DE	33.9
WV	14.6	KS	20.1	OR	27.1	NY	34.8
OK	15.1	SC	20.1	MI	27.4	UT	34.9
MT	15.3	MO	20.5	IN	28.5	HI	36.3
NC	16.8	NM	21.0	CO	29.0	MD	36.6
KY	17.3	WY	21.3	WA	29.5	NV	36.8
AL	17.4	WI	22.6	OH	30.5	CT	38.4
ME	17.8	NH	23.3	PA	31.0	MA	40.1
ID	18.1	TN	23.5	IL	31.4	NJ	43.4
VT	18.3					RI	46.0

* Numbers are rounded

"...there is a persistent attitude that if we close our eyes, sooner or later, one way or another, the 'rural problem' will just go away."
-Why Rural Matters

Urgency Indicators

- Average rural teaching salary
- Difference between rural and nonrural teacher salaries
- Percentage of students who are eligible for free school lunches (a measure of the state's poverty level)
- Percentage of rural communities scoring below the national average on the Education Climate Index
- Average rural student-to-teacher ratio
- Percentage of rural householders with less than 12 years of schooling and no diploma
- Percentage of rural schools with Internet access
- Percentage of out-of-field teachers in rural schools
- Average percentage of rural school expenditures spent on instruction
- Percentage of rural schools with declining enrollment of 10% or more
- Percentage of the state's population living in rural places

The categories in these tables merely describe a state's relative position along a continuum. When evaluating the urgency of policy attention to rural matters, there is no bright line distinguishing New Mexico as "urgent" from Montana as merely "critical." Likewise, the difference in importance between Vermont as "crucial" and Alaska as merely "very important" are negligible. However, these categories do allow us to group states into certain clusters in order to discuss patterns in the findings.

Urgency Gauge Cumulative Rankings

Given conditions in the state's rural schools and communities, how urgent is it in each state that policymakers develop explicit rural education policies?

Urgent		Critical		Serious		Fair	
MS	13.0	MT	20.3	IN	25.1	TX	28.5
KY	14.8	IL	20.3	KS	25.3	WA	28.5
AR	15.0	OK	21.1	OR	25.5	CO	28.5
SD	15.8	MO	21.3	CA	25.8	NH	28.6
ND	16.4	ID	22.5	FL	26.1	NE	29.2
TN	18.3	WI	22.5	PA	26.1	DE	30.3
LA	18.6	AZ	23.3	ME	26.3	MD	30.3
SC	18.9	VT	23.6	OH	26.5	HI	32.7
AL	19.1	IA	23.7	AK	26.6	NY	35.2
WV	19.2	VA	24.2	NC	27.0	MA	35.3
GA	19.5	MN	24.4	UT	27.9	CT	35.8
NM	20.1	WY	24.7	NV	28.0	RI	40.1
		MI	24.8			NJ	40.5

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Community Counts When School Reform Matters

There are always lessons from your home place. In my case, my hometown yields a big lesson for school reformers: Community counts when you are trying to change schools.

My hometown is Dalton, Massachusetts, in the Berkshire Hills, prominent participant in Shays' Rebellion, the 1786 rural uprising (over confiscatory land taxes) that helped prompt convening of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and eventually helped lead to adoption of the Bill of Rights.

Searching for this glorious history in the local history section of the Dalton library a few years back, I found instead a small collection of books about an experimental local school reform called the Dalton Laboratory Plan. Launched in the early 1920s by Helen Parkhurst, a bright and vigorous young educator from New York City who gained the cooperation of a progressive local superintendent, the laboratory plan was a local adaptation of reformer John Dewey's principles and became part of what was to be known in curriculum circles as the "Individual System."

Aimed at engaging poor, working class, immigrant children whose parents filled Dalton's burgeoning paper mills (and who were said to place a low value on education), the Laboratory Plan did not change the curriculum as much as it changed the role of the student in learning. Programmed instruction and lectures, grading, daily assignments, and, most of all, class recitation, were abandoned in favor of student-designed individual plans of study/learning contracts. Each plan was to include work outside school, in the community, partly in hopes that appreciation for learning would infect parents, too. Teachers were to be facilitators of learning, responding to each child's needs as they emerged. Students were accountable for maintaining records of their own progress and for demonstrating competency through examination and written reports, whenever they felt prepared. The "individuality" in this system was not in the content of the curriculum, but in the pace, place, and practice of the child in the school. According to the books, including one by Parkhurst herself (her dissertation, I believe), the experiment was so successful that it spread rapidly, especially in England, where its working class appeal was especially welcome.

I was stunned by this history. I had gone to that school just 40 years later and did not recognize any of the elements of the Dalton Laboratory Plan in my own experience there. We sat at our desks, memorized the periodic table of elements, diagrammed sentences, and recited the Gettysburg Address. There was no individual learning contract, we took tests when told to, and we sat in neat rows of chairs, 32 students to a classroom, baby boomers all. And most emphatically, we did not go into the community for lessons—ever. I didn't learn anything in school about Dalton's role in Shays' Rebellion, let alone its role in school reform.

Intrigued, I interviewed my parents, both of working class families, both of whom were attending Dalton schools by the time the books lauding the Dalton Laboratory Plan were in print. As I described the plan to them, their brows furrowed and they became skeptical. That is not the way they remembered school. They remembered standing by their desks and reciting.

Apparently, when Helen Parkhurst went home to write her book and the superintendent moved on (or up) or was fired, the inertia that is community restored tradition to the school. Community is, after all, the central strategy in the human quest for stability, for something that can be counted on.

Victory is often declared too soon in school reform. A lot of what has passed as reform is merely a veneer-thin abstraction of what educators think best for schools. It lacks the conviction of the students, of those who send their children to learn, and of those who pay the taxes that finance the learning. Reform cannot outlast community. To be effective and to last, reform must be imbedded in community.

The Dalton Laboratory Plan produced five books on schools reform, and perhaps several dissertations, but it did not produce change in education for kids in Dalton. Community counts if you want schools to change.

—Marty Strange, director of the Rural Trust Policy Program❖

Matters of Fact

More Good News on Small Schools

A recent study by Bank Street College of Education supports the idea that small schools are more successful in educating students. Among the benefits of small schools, the reports cites increased student achievement, decreased dropout rates, and decreased levels of violence as the most noticeable. The study focuses only on urban Chicago schools. For more information, visit www.bnkst.edu or call 212.875.4400.

New Report on Teacher Supply

The National Center for Education Statistics has released a statistical analysis report on the sources of newly hired teachers from 1987–1988 to 1993–1994. The report does not examine the sources of teachers in rural or urban schools but analyzes the basic demographic characteristics, teaching qualifications, career paths, and former occupations of newly hired teachers. The report, *Teacher Supply in the United States: Sources of Newly Hired Teachers in Public and Private Schools, 1987–88 to 1993–94*, is available at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000309 or by calling 202.502.7300.

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Matters of Fact

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Teacher Shortage Leads to Training Shortcuts

The New York Times recently reported that, in an attempt to stem teacher shortages, some states are creating quick credentialing programs. Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Massachusetts have all started their own teacher training programs, and several other states are considering legislation that would do the same. Most of the programs are based on the Teach for America model, which trains potential teachers over the summer.

Deliberation and Community Involvement in South Carolina

A recent report by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), *Practical Deliberation in Local School Districts: A South Carolina Experiment*, examines the use of deliberation as a way of involving the community in public education. The paper is a case study of a deliberative experiment in South Carolina and finds that deliberation can be more inclusive than more conventional venues. The report is available for a small fee. For more information, visit http://www.cse.ucla.edu/CRESST/Summary/520.htm or call 310.206.1532.❖

Rural Trust Position Openings

The Rural School and Community Trust is seeking applicants for two positions in its rural education Policy Program. Positions are open until filled.

Field Organizer

The Field Organizer will work with a small policy program team to support grassroots groups in a dozen states in their organizing and policy work by providing tailored technical assistance and networking opportunities with other grassroots groups engaged in similar work.

State Policy Monitor

The Policy Monitor will be responsible for monitoring and reporting on the condition of rural education and on state policies affecting rural schools and communities.

For both of these positions field experience is essential. Location is flexible but candidates should be comfortable working unsupervised in a virtual office environment requiring substantial reliance on computers. Extensive travel time is anticipated.

For more information and application guidelines, please visit our website at www.ruraledu.org or call 802.728.5899.❖

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Rural Policy Matters

October 2000 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

The Changing Face of Rural America:

Newly Diverse Communities Struggle With New Demands

Recently, *The New York Times* reported on an unusual idea taking shape in Iowa: to recruit immigrants in an attempt to stem the state's continued population decline. Iowa, which has close to 40% of its population living in rural places, has not recovered from the loss of families during the farm crisis of the 1980s and is still losing young people after they leave high school. With a very low unemployment rate, the state needs a workforce that can sustain the robust economy—hence the proposal to recruit immigrants.

While Iowa may be the only state with an explicit proposal to actively recruit immigrants, many states are seeing their community demographics change as the healthy economy continues to attract new workers. These changes are especially noticeable in small, rural communities. Between 1990 and 1996, nonmetropolitan counties across the United States gained nearly 3 million residents, compared to a gain of 1.3 million people between 1980 and 1989. Most of the growth can be attributed to a net gain of almost 2 million immigrants.

Much of the recent growth in rural counties is due to minority migration, and most of it involves younger age groups. According to research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS), minorities constituted 17% of all rural residents in 1997, up 3 percentage points from 1990. In nonmetropolitan areas, 24.1% of minorities in are under the age of 17. In 1997, over one-third of all minority groups (Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, African American, and Hispanic) were under the age of 18, compared to one-fourth of Whites. So while demographic changes affect entire communities, the changes are particularly felt in rural schools.

A more diverse student body presents schools and teachers with new learning opportunities, but it can also bring challenges. Poverty and low levels of educational attainment mean that many minority children in rural communities are at risk. The ERS has found that, with the exception of Asians and Pacific Islanders, rural minorities age 25 and over have lower levels of educational attainment. In 1997, 53% of rural Hispanics, 41% of rural African Americans, and 32% of rural Native Americans did not have a high school diploma. As the minority population in a rural community increases, so does the level of minority poverty. The White poverty level, however, does not increase as minority populations grow, which suggests that there is significant income inequality among racial groups.

Whether they be in communities that have high minority populations and poverty rates or in newly diverse communities, rural schools and teachers across the country are facing the challenge of how to adapt to change and difficult conditions while meeting the needs of all of their students. For small and rural schools, this is not an easy task.

In addition to trying to overcome the poverty-related issues that impede student learning, schools and teachers must deal with language barriers, changes in funding needs, and racism

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Groups Build Grassroots Leadership in the Southeast

A parent in Drew, Mississippi, is concerned about her child's progress in school, but the principal does not allow open access to the school and gives the parent an appointment time she can't meet. In rural Georgia, community leaders find out that the local school board is meeting unofficially over dinner. In a rural North Carolina county, Hispanic parents attend the first PTA meeting, but there is no interpreter and they cannot participate in the meeting or talk to their children's teachers.

Such events are part and parcel of the daily life of Rural Trust–supported projects in these states. Parents and community leaders often work in environments where there are significant historical and cultural divisions so that when problems arise, it is hard to resolve them. Sometimes there are serious resource issues that exacerbate relationships among the community and the schools. Where do rural parents and community leaders turn when they are faced with such situations? What can be done to help them and the schools repair their relationships and become allies in the struggle to provide good education for the community's children?

The Mississippi Education Working Group, the Center for Children and Education in Georgia, and the Education and Law Project in North Carolina support parents and community leaders in resolving local issues, and they bring people together to break down isolation and teach each other about common problems

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Newly Diverse Communities

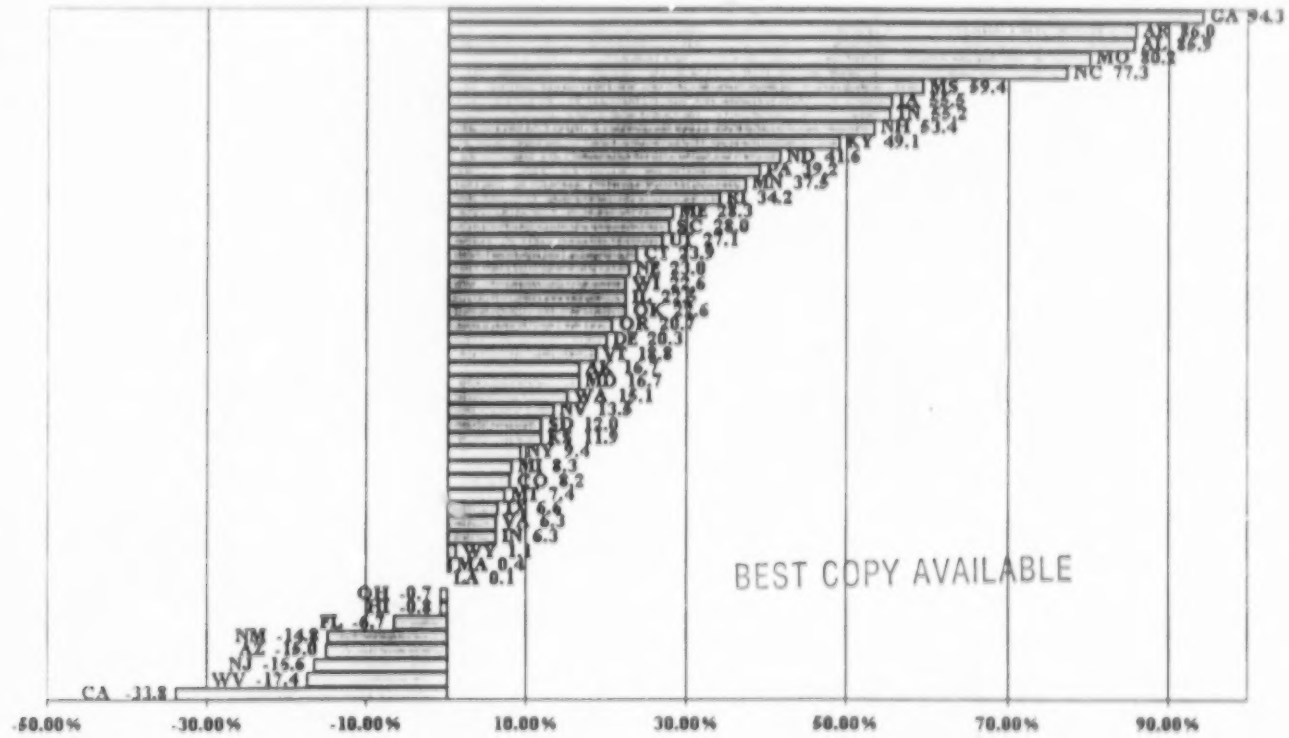
continued from page 1

and stereotypes. Rural schools are finding themselves in need of bilingual staff members and programs for students with limited English proficiency. More programs and services for at-risk students are needed, but the changes in funding needs are frequently occurring faster than the funding cycles, leaving rural schools financially strapped. In areas where schools are evaluated by test scores, one or two new students with language difficulties can drastically alter a small school's standing. In some states, this can mean a difference in funding. Rural schools, which have traditionally drawn support from their communities, are more frequently finding that racism and resentment are dividing communities. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of the changing demographics of rural schools and communities is that it has been happening over a short time period, so that immediate solutions are needed for long-term issues.

Rural school enrollment data for the years 1994 to 1997 show just how quickly these changes are coming about. Some of the least racially and ethnically diverse states experienced the biggest increases in minority enrollment in rural schools from 1994 to 1997. In Iowa, where 98% of rural students are White, the number of Hispanic students in rural schools increased by 56%, and the number of African American students increased by 53%. In New Hampshire, where 99% of rural students are White, the number of Hispanic students increased by 53%, and the number of African American students increased by 29%. Between 1994 and 1997, the number of African American students enrolled in rural schools in 13 states—Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming—increased by over 20%. During that same period, the number of Hispanic students enrolled in rural schools in 11 states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, New Hampshire, and Tennessee—increased by over 40%. Georgia experienced the most significant increase, with the number of Hispanic students in rural schools growing by 94%. Of the different minority groups, the Hispanic enrollment in rural schools increased the most between 1994 and 1997.

As low unemployment rates and migration shifts continue to change the demographic makeup of rural communities, rural schools will continue to face the pressures and challenges of adapting to these changes. Whether states intentionally recruit new residents or whether the patterns continue on their own, policy makers and communities alike will have to develop new strategies to ensure that schools can continue to best serve their students.❖

Change in Hispanic enrollment in rural schools by state, 1994-1997



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Grassroots Leadership

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and strategies. At the same time, they introduce parents and community leaders to the larger state and national policy contexts in which their schools and communities operate as well as to resources that may help them rebuild trust and create good schools.

The Mississippi Education Working Group supports local community groups in about a dozen school districts and continues to expand into the southernmost parts of the state. Each local group is working on the issues of greatest concern in its community: one group is documenting discipline problems, including excessive corporal punishment, suspensions and expulsions; another has been working with parents of special needs children who aren't getting services; and yet another is in a long battle to improve low achievement that has not been remedied by state takeover. Members of these and other groups in Mississippi meet together several times a year to share their successes, resources, and challenges, to plan the next steps, and to learn about what is happening at the state level and how that affects their local work.

For example, Mississippi continues its inexorable march toward state-mandated "high stakes" accountability. The law already allows state takeover (appointing a "conservator") for failing districts. During the next few years, children who do not perform at a certain level in selected grades will be made to repeat the grade. The community groups are concerned about the high percentage of non-certified personnel used as long-term substitute teachers in rural areas. They feel it is not fair for students to be held accountable for their performance when they are being taught by long-term substitutes. Community groups are documenting the problem and taking their findings to their elected representatives and to officials of their state education departments with the hope of affecting the final details of the accountability plan.

Members of the Working Group have focused on special education as well. Due to the unremitting efforts of a local group to get services to which their children are entitled, the associate state superintendent visited with members in their community. As a result of that meeting, he has launched an eight-site listening tour to hear the concerns of parents of special education students throughout Mississippi before hiring a new state-level special education director.

In Georgia there is a similar pattern of local activism and leadership development, combined with state work through the Center for Children and Education. Because they had worked to get support services for students in their districts, community members in Terrell County could speak from the heart about the need for more support services when Governor Barnes' commission took testimony about reforming Georgia's schools. In another county, the local group was able to force the school board to stop their unofficial meetings and were able to use these experiences to speak to the governor's commission about the importance of local and open decision making and the need for new forms of governance, such as school site councils. Underlying all of these very public events is a long period of building local community leadership, learning how to get information and analyze it, and planning strategies. When changes occur, the local group is in place to support parents and community members in taking full advantage of new opportunities.

In North Carolina, the limited English–proficient population has risen 250%—from 14,881 to 37,212—in 5 years. The children, most of them Hispanic, enter schools that are not prepared for them. This problem is especially stressful in rural communities, where certified English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are in short supply and children are scattered across school districts. The Center for Law and Education produced a report analyzing this trend and argued that the current lump sum of $10 million for limited English–proficient students, already inadequate, was being spread thinner and thinner. Hispanic parents are beginning to become organized across the state and recently managed to get the state legislature to increase funding this year to about $17 million. And at the local level, parents and communities are attending a parent studies program conducted in Spanish by the Law and Education project. Graduates of the program are organizing Hispanic parent groups in their local school districts and are applying pressure to ensure that such basic services as interpreters at regular school functions and enough ESL teachers for their children are provided.

It is hard to create a good school when trust, good communication, and sense of ownership and partnership between the school and the community are not present. Community leaders and parents in these states are working hard and working smart to re-kindle the relationships they need with their schools so that their children can succeed and their schools can serve the entire community.❖

Matters of Fact

Teachers and technology

According to a report released by the National Center for Education Statistics, rural teachers who have computers at home or at school are more likely than their urban and town peers to use the Internet to research and prepare activities and lesson plans (56% rural versus 48% urban). Rural schools are more likely than urban schools to have computers in the classroom (87% rural versus 80% urban), and small schools are more likely to have computers in the classroom than large schools (87% of schools with enrollments under 300 versus 71% of schools with enrollments over 1,000). The report *Teachers' Tools for the 21st Century: A Report on Teachers' Use of Technology*, is only available online and can be found at http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000102 .

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Gates backs small schools

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has given $56 million in grants to support the design and development of small schools. The Gates Foundation has committed to a 3-year plan to help improve public education, and foundation officials cite the growing research on the benefits of small schools as the reason for the recent grants. Much of the grant money is going toward resources and research. Several projects associated with the Trusts' Rural Challenge work in years past are among the grantees.

Grants include:

$7.9 Million to The Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in Minneapolis to work with the Cincinnati, St. Paul, Minnestota., and West Clermont, Ohio, districts to explore ways to reconfigure ten large high schools serving a total of 16,000 students into smaller learning settings.

$4.5 million to the EdVisions Cooperative to replicate the Minnesota New Country School's instructional and governance systems in 15 sites in Minnesota, Wisconsin and other states over the next five years.

$4.9 million to the Alaska Quality Schools Coalition to redesign six rural, low-income districts.

Arkansas community seeks to reclaim school

The small Arkansas community of Wabbaseka is attempting to regain the school that it lost in a 1993 district consolidation. The community has applied for open enrollment charter status and hopes to open a K–12 school for 250–300 students. The consolidated district school board has voted to sell the Wabbaseka school building and land back to the community for $1, but the Arkansas Board of Education will make the final decision. According to the Associated Press, parents in Wabbaseka want their school to be community-based.

Alaska to fund (some) rural school construction

The 2001 Alaska state budget includes $93 million earmarked for six rural school construction projects. This is the first time that state money will be spent on school construction and is the first step toward satisfying the Alaska Supreme Court's 1999 order that the legislature provide adequate school buildings for rural and Native American children. The list of rural schools in need of construction aid is long, however, and only six will receive state funding in 2001.❖

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Rural Policy Matters

November 2000 — A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action — www.ruraledu.org

New Study Finds Small Districts Work, Too

"Small" seems to work in beating back the negative effect that poverty has on student achievement, whether you are talking about small schools or small districts, according to the latest in a series of statistical studies sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust.

The study concludes that reducing either district size or school size without altering the other would narrow the test score achievement gap between students from more and less affluent communities. Reducing both district and school size would narrow that gap even more.

The study, entitled *The Influence of Scale on School Performance: A Multi-Level Extension of the Matthew Principle*, was conducted by Robert Bickel of Marshall University and Craig Howley of Ohio University and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory. It was published in the electronic journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v8n22/).

Earlier research by Bickel and Howley in Georgia, Montana, Ohio, and Texas found that, as schools become larger, the negative effect of poverty on student achievement increases and that the well-documented correlation between poverty and low achievement is much stronger—as much as 10 times stronger—in larger schools than in smaller ones.

But in those studies, when the researchers applied the same methodology separately to district size, the results generally indicated little or no influence over achievement, except in Ohio (where smaller districts had some positive effect on achievement in poorer communities). Weaker influence was detected for district size in Montana and Texas, and none at all in Georgia. According to these studies, school size matters a lot, but district size doesn't matter very much, if at all.

The new study asks a more complicated question: Does district size (measured by number of students) interact with school size to affect student performance in communities of various levels of affluence? That is, do students in a small school operating within a large district perform differently from those in a big school within a small district, or from those in a small school within a small district?

To examine this question, Bickel and Howley used the same test score and poverty level data from the earlier study in Georgia. Georgia was selected because the earlier analysis had failed to indicate that the size of a district had any effect on student performance measured at the district

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Poverty's Power* Over Student Achievement in Georgia is Weaker in Both Smaller Schools and Smaller Districts

Lower numbers mean poverty has less impact on Composite Test Scores

	Grade 8	Grade 11
Larger Schools in Larger Districts	76	77
Larger Schools in Smaller Districts	72	74
Smaller Schools in Larger Districts	63	54
Smaller Schools in Smaller Districts	35	16

Lower numbers mean poverty has less impact on Reading Comprehension (8) or English (11)

	Grade 8	Grade 11
Larger Schools in Larger Districts	84	69
Larger Schools in Smaller Districts	74	59
Smaller Schools in Larger Districts	71	28
Smaller Schools in Smaller Districts	36	16

Lower numbers mean poverty has less impact on Mathematics

	Grade 8	Grade 11
Larger Schools in Larger Districts	71	72
Larger Schools in Smaller Districts	59	65
Smaller Schools in Larger Districts	46	48
Smaller Schools in Smaller Districts	29	25

Lower numbers mean poverty has less impact on Science

	Grade 8	Grade 11
Larger Schools in Larger Districts	82	73
Larger Schools in Smaller Districts	73	71
Smaller Schools in Larger Districts	70	46
Smaller Schools in Smaller Districts	37	27

*Poverty's "power" rating is the portion of the variance in test scores that is statistically attributable to the level of community poverty.

Small Districts

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level. This study would again look at how district size related to student performance, but this time it would look at student performance school by school and consider both the size of the school and the size of the district in which it operated.

Poverty's "Power Rating" Weaker in Smaller Schools and Districts

The study uses a complex method that combines school-level and district-level influences. Previous studies showed how *school size*, for instance, interacts with *school-level poverty* to influence school performance. But the new study shows *district size* interacting with *schools' poverty level* to influence school-level performance. Influences, in other words, recombine in many ways to affect school performance. The previous studies could not detect these recombinations because they kept the influence of school and district characteristics separate. The result for Georgia is simple, however: district size matters.

The most powerful results in this study come in an analysis of how much "power" poverty has over student achievement. Schools were subdivided into larger and smaller schools at the median school size. Then each of these groups of schools was subdivided into two groups, one composed of schools operating in districts that were above median size, and those operating in districts that were below median size.

The researchers then used ordinary correlation analysis to determine how much of the variance in average student test scores between the schools in each of these four groups could be statistically explained by the level of poverty among each school's students. The Rural School and Community Trust refers to this statistic, officially termed the "variance," as poverty's "power rating."

Exactly the same pattern emerged in both grades 8 and 11 on each of four test subjects administered at both grade levels (see table on first page for detail):

- Poverty had the most power over test scores in large schools operating within large districts—depending on which test, between 71 and 84% of the variance in scores was explained by poverty levels in these schools.
- Poverty had less power over achievement in large schools operating within small districts—between 59 and 74%.
- Poverty had even less power over achievement in smaller schools operating within larger districts—between 28 and 70%.
- Poverty's power over achievement was weakest in smaller schools operating in smaller districts—accounting for as little as 16% of the variance in test scores and never more than 37%.

Poverty's power was always weaker in smaller schools than in larger ones, but among both larger and smaller schools, it was weaker in those operating in smaller districts.

The result has real implications for the growing movement to break up large schools in urban districts. The interaction effect between school and district size indicates that poverty's power over achievement within large districts might be lowered by 40 percentage points by doing nothing more than reducing school size within the district. On the other hand, it might be reduced by as much as 60 percentage points by reducing both school size and district size.

Why Might District Size Matter?

This kind of analysis does not reveal the causes of any statistical relationship. We can only guess about what causes the powerful patterns of relationship revealed in these data. The bottom line seems to be that small works in human institutions. Students don't attend districts, of course. They attend schools. But districts run schools, and big district bureaucracy is known to hamper communications and action at the school level.

Bickel and Howley point out that school reform has mostly been about process—the role and methods of teaching; the participation of parents; the motivation of students; and, lately, the influences of curriculum, standards, and assessment. The structure of the schooling system—the number of students in a class, the size of the school, and even the scale of the governance system in which the school functions have received less attention despite a large and growing body of research that says size matters and small works. There is a wealth of evidence that this is true for the size of a school. This study suggests that it is true for the size of a district as well.❖

California Suit Addresses State Responsibilities

A suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union intended to hold the State of California accountable for the "appalling conditions" of schools in poor, minority areas has reached San Francisco Superior Court. The suit lists 46 of the state's 8,500 schools. Claire Cooper, writing in the *Sacramento Bee* (11/1/00), reports that Judge Peter J. Busch considers the constitutional implications clear in the case, but questions remain as to whether the state has violated any legal standard.

The state is arguing that the process of administrative complaints should be exhausted to see if the local school districts are able to solve these problems. But ACLU lawyer Mark Rosenbaum counters that the problems go beyond what local authorities can solve on their own, saying: "What the state did wrong was fail to assure the delivery of these basic educational necessities." Rosenbaum said the purpose of the suit was "to establish a system of accountability wherein the buck stops with the state." He argues that "the state should be going to the schools and asking, 'Do kids have books? Do kids share classrooms with rats?'"❖

"The bottom line... small works in human institutions."

Matters of Fact

School pesticide laws vary from state to state

A recent report from Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuses of Pesticides examines state pesticide laws and finds that laws vary widely across the states. *The Schooling of State Pesticides—2000* reports that 31 states have laws offering limited levels of protection. Only six states have established restricted spray zones around school property (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and North Carolina). Massachusetts is the only state that bans the use of certain pesticides by schools. For more information, visit http://www.beyondpesticides.org/ or call 202.543.5450.

North Dakota losing both students and teachers

Not only are North Dakota schools facing a teacher shortage, but they're losing students faster than anticipated. According to the *Bismarck Tribune*, 41 districts reported 73 unfilled teaching positions this year. The shortage is largely attributed to North Dakota's low teacher salaries. To deal with the shortage, many schools are increasing class sizes and teacher workloads. Schools are also facing sharply declining enrollments. The *Fargo Forum* reports that enrollment numbers are down 2.7% from last year. According to Tom Decker, the Finance Director for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, schools will lose $2500 to $3000 for every student they lose but will only gain $56 to $80 per pupil if state aid is reallocated. Of all the public schools in North Dakota are in rural places.

School readiness in rural America

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory has recently published a report, *Getting Kids Ready for School in Rural America*. According to author Carol B. Perroncel, "the success of rural children amidst the changing social and economic tides of the twenty-first century is predicated on the readiness of homes, schools, and communities to support high-quality and developmentally appropriate programs, assess children appropriately, link community resources, encourage joint staff development, offer parent training and support, and improve access to quality health care." The report is available at http://www.ael.org/rel/rural/abstract/perroncel.htm or by calling 800.624.9120.

Iowa addresses changing demographics

To help schools and communities adjust to an increasingly diverse student body, the state of Iowa has introduced a plan entitled *Building Inclusive Schools and Communities*. Included in the report are recommendations to include multicultural education training for school staff, suggestions for the recruitment and retention of school employees of varied backgrounds, and recognition of the need for additional resources for schools serving low-income students. For more information, visit the Iowa Department of Education's web site at http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ or call 515.281.5294.

Forest community funding

Kari Arfstrom, who follows rural issues at the American Association of School Administrators, reports success in efforts to help pass"The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act:"

In a bipartisan vote, both the U.S. House and the Senate sent "The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act" to the President for his signature. He signed it on Monday, Oct. 30. The legislation addresses the crisis in America's rural forest counties driven by the precipitous decline in federal land management revenues over the last decade. The bill provides safety-net payments while directing a portion of the funds to the development of local projects to address community needs.

The law provides funding for more than 1,900 school districts in 800 rural forest counties across the nation reaching over 4 million students. In addition to aiding rural education and infrastructure resources, the bill also provides $73 million dollars towards local projects to improve ecosystems and reduce the risks of catastrophic fire.❖

Lesson from the Field: Document Everything

West Virginia has closed one quarter of its schools in the last ten years in a state driven consolidation wave that citizens are working to change. Rural West Virginians got a boost in an unexpected way in September when Governor Cecil Underwood surprised a crowd in Lincoln County by proposing a distance learning project as an alternative to consolidating four local high schools into one large facility.

At a gathering in Harts, a community where there is strong sentiment for keeping the local high school intact, Underwood made his suggestions when no media reporters were present. The Governor may not have realized at the time that his statements were captured on videotape by Challenge West Virginia member Thomas Ramey, Jr., who promptly shared the tape with the media.

"The announcement certainly doesn't mean that Gov. Underwood supports small schools," Challenge West Virginia co-director Linda Martin pointed out. "What it does mean is that he recognizes people throughout West Virginia want to keep their community schools. He knows many voters are upset with the current policy that forces school consolidation."

Thanks to an alert activist ready to document everything, the rest of the state knows what he said and the discussion around the value of small community schools has been raised to a new level. For more information visit the Challenge West Virginia website at www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv or contact Linda Martin at 304.744.5916 or by email to LBM94aol.com.❖

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New Report Shows "Digital Divide" Persistent for Disadvantaged

A new report released on October 11th by the Consumers Union (publisher of *Consumer Reports*) and the Consumer Federation of America, shows that the "digital divide" is persistent even in the face of expanded Internet connectivity and computer ownership. Based on a survey of almost 2000 respondents nationwide, the report entitled, *Disconnected, Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised*, shows that minorities, older households, and the poor remain unable to participate fully in the information age more so than other groups.

"Once policymakers understand that these vulnerable groups are harmed by their lack of access to technology, they should begin to seek cost effective avenues to address this deprivation," said Gene Kimmelman, Co-Director of CU's Washington Office. "People of every age, income and race are concerned that technological advances are widening the gap between rich and poor and fear that the information revolution will leave many behind." While rural/urban breakout was considered, this and several other demographic factors were not found to be statistically significant in this study.

The organizations advocate that tax breaks and subsidies should be going to disadvantaged households that need to buy computers and Internet access rather than to corporations who provide the infrastructure for these services. As the report states: "Embedded in these numbers is the fact that 81% of those who have a computer are either fully or partially connected. In other words, once respondents have a computer, they are very likely to be connected." The full report is available on the Internet at: http://www.consumerfed.org/digitaldivide/disconnected102000.pdf.

More Resources

The U.S. Department of Education has launched a website dedicated to rural education information. The site, housed within the National Center for Education Statistics, is called "Navigating Resources for Rural Schools." It offers links to data sources and other resources. To learn more, visit http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/RuralData.asp.

The General Accounting Office released a report in September outlining concerns about commercialism in schools. The report points out that there are no comprehensive laws or policies at any level concerning commercial activities in school facilities, from the placement of soft drink brands to piping in commercial television. The report, *Commercial Activities in Schools*, is available online at: http://www.gao.gov/new.items/he00156.pdf or by calling the GAO at 202.512.6000.

Rural Policy Matters

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The Rural School and Community Trust seeks to understand complex issues affecting rural schools and communities; to inform the public debate over rural education policy; and to help rural communities act on education policy issues affecting them. Comments, questions, and contributions for *Rural Policy Matters* should be sent to:

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Rural Policy Matters

December 2000 Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action www.ruraledu.org

Ohio Finance Litigation

Winning Isn't Everything

School finance litigation often centers on whether the state spends enough money to meet its constitutional obligations to educate every child (adequacy), and whether that money is equitably distributed among schools (equity). But as we've seen in cases like *Pauley v. Bailey* in West Virginia—also known as "the Recht decision"—winning in court doesn't always result in good solutions on the ground in rural areas. Beaten in court, West Virginia set up its School Building Authority that has used state funding of school building construction as a lever to force the consolidation of one-fourth of the state's schools over the past ten years. Ohio's recent experience makes that state another one to watch.

In *DeRolph v. Ohio*, the Ohio Supreme Court in 1997 overturned the public school financing system. The case grew out of the organizing efforts of rural school administrators, but soon became part of the Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding, a broadly based organization of more than 500 school districts—both rural and urban.

The court gave the state legislature one year to overhaul the system. The legislature was ordered to make the system fairer, to provide more funding, and to reduce the system's dependence on local property taxes. But the court left the details of a solution to the legislature.

In response, the legislature made some incremental changes to the finance system, but in a subsequent decision (referred to as *DeRolph II*), the Ohio Supreme Court decided in 2000 that the changes were inadequate and once again gave the legislature one year to fix the system. To date, the legislature has not acted, but it will convene after the first of the year, and those who follow school funding litigation should expect action this session.

This is a case to watch for rural interests. The Ohio Coalition and its lawyers have expertly handled the litigation, but they have not sought a political remedy that would specifically address the special needs and concerns of rural areas. There also does not appear to be an organized rural constituency to advocate for a legislative solution that would address these needs and concerns.

The approach in Ohio appears to be to unite as broad a constituency as possible around general principles and goals for school funding reform. Rural schools might easily be lost in the shuffle. They may get more money, but they also may end up being saddled with more centralized control and less flexibility in crafting local solutions to their school needs—as in West Virginia.

That is already the case in the area of facilities finance. One of the spin-off effects of *DeRolph* has been the creation of a state facilities commission that has adopted a facilities manual that schools must comply with if they are to receive additional funding for new buildings. Reportedly, rural interests were not involved when this manual was adopted. But at least one rural advocacy group, Rural Action, is raising concerns administratively about the inflexibility of the construction standards as applied to rural schools. Rural Action is also building a citizen-based effort to make Ohio's school facilities system work for rural areas.

In the meantime, the legislature grinds toward a court-ordered comprehensive school finance reform that may or may not be of value to rural schools. Ohio is a state to watch in the

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Counting Rural Out

For years, the federal number crunchers have defined "metropolitan" counties precisely, and then simply referred to everything that didn't fit the metropolitan definition as "nonmetropolitan." We in rural America are what is left over when you finish counting what matters most. We are known only for what we are not.

Believe it or not, the federal government has found a way to downgrade us even more. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), that mysterious agency that rules the budget process and coordinates federal statistical systems, is considering adoption of a new way to classify counties. The new system will be based on the idea of "core based statistical areas" (CBSAs). The old "metropolitan" regions (clustered around a core of 50,000 or more in population) will be one kind of CBSA. But nonmetropolitan counties will be subdivided into a new breed of CBSA known as "micropolitan" regions (around a core of 10–50,000 in population). Everything else will become known simply as "outside CBSA."

Nonmetropolitan counties hold about 25 % of the nation's population, but 15% of Americans live in micropolitan areas, and only 10% live outside a CBSA. For these truly rural areas, being referred to as "outside CBSA" may not be so bad. It's a term so arcane that it somehow seems less offensive than the more condescending term "nonmetropolitan." We are now actually both "outside CBSA" and "nonmetropolitan."

Importantly, some counties will now be part of metropolitan and micropolitan regions based on commuting patterns alone. If 25% of resident workers of a county

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Small Does Work

A Florida Story You'll Want to Hear

About six years ago, State Representative William Andrews, who represents Delray Beach, became interested in finding schools that work, schools that could serve as models for all schools in Florida. Andrews, who notes that he has nothing vested because he is not an educator and does not have children, reasoned that "someone somewhere must be doing something right that can be duplicated." Throughout his research, Andrews found that the factor that was consistently most important in creating a place where students achieved academically and socially was the size of the school: Small schools worked. After a thorough, five-year investigation of a wide range of issues, including teacher training, quality and sufficiency of textbooks, condition of facilities, and other variables, Andrews is so convinced of the merits of small schools that he describes himself as "glued in the corner" on the issue.

Over the years Andrews tried to convince other Florida legislators and members of the state's Academic Excellence Council that the size of schools made a significant difference in the way students achieved academically, but it took a national tragedy to make people listen. The massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado was a catalyst for discussion throughout Florida of the problems of large schools—an issue with particular consequence in Florida, which has the largest schools in the nation, averaging 761 students each in 1994.

Because Representative Andrews was so closely identified with the subject of small schools and had become a "lightning rod" for the issues surrounding them, he sought bipartisan help from members of the Academic Excellence Council to make the case for small schools. Members listened to his argument, as did the chair of the Academic Excellence Council, Representative Evelyn Lynn from Ormand Beach. The Council was concerned about the problems in large schools, including the kind of anonymity and disconnectedness that can lead to violence. They worried about schools like G. Holmes Braddock High School in Miami, with over 5,211 students in 1998–1999—the largest high school in the country—the many elementary schools with over 1,000 students, and middle schools with more than 2,000 pupils. They wanted to make changes that would help all students.

The Council proposed legislation, which became effective in July 2000, that requires reduction in the size of new school facilities built after July 1, 2003, and the creation of "schools-within-schools" in existing facilities. From their research, Council members had learned that that small schools provide benefits of "reduced discipline problems and crime, reduced truancy and gang participation, reduced dropout rates, improved teacher and student attitudes, improved student self-perception, student academic achievement equal to or superior to that of students at larger schools, and increased parental involvement." Members of the Council were determined that Florida children and their communities should enjoy these benefits of smaller schools, and they included that language in a bill to amend the Florida Code.

The new law requires that elementary schools have no more than 500 students, middle schools no more than 700, high schools no more than 900, and K–12 schools no more than 700. Beginning July 1, 2003, all plans for new construction of school facilities must comply with these requirements, and educators must encourage schools-within-schools that meet the same guidelines to reduce the "anonymity of students in large schools."

The Florida Department of Education says that it will comply with the law but hasn't had sufficient time since it passed to make recommendations to districts. The Department has requested clarification of some of the wording in the law, such as "encouragement" to create schools-within-schools, which could have a wide range of interpretations. Department staff is hard-pressed now to build schools in places like Dade County, where rapid population growth means that by the time a new school opens it is often inadequate to meet current needs and the district must use "relocatables."

Representatives Andrews and Lynn expect school districts to fight hard against this legislation because people fear change and are afraid small schools will be more expensive to run. Representative Andrews published a paper several years ago, "Building Small Schools Without Raising Taxes," which shows that savings in transportation costs alone are significant and that there are enormous potential savings in administrative and security costs in smaller schools as well. When we consider that small schools graduate a higher percentage of students and that more of those students go on to post-secondary education than students in large schools, we begin to understand that small schools are cost-effective.

We applaud Florida for recognizing the value of small schools and for passing legislation to reduce the size of their schools. Small does work.❖

Statistics on School Crime and Safety

The updated edition of National Center for Education Statistic's report, "Indicators of School Crime and Safety," is now available. The report finds that rates of crime in schools have declined or stayed constant. Findings include the fact that 8% of rural schools reported at least one serious crime in 1996, compared to 17% of urban schools and 5% of suburban schools. Of schools with enrollments of fewer than 300 students, 3.9% reported at least one serious violent incident in 1996, compared to 32.9% of schools of over 1,000 students. For more information, call 877-4-ED-PUBS (877.433.7827) or visit http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001017.❖

Counting Rural Out

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commute to cities to work, the county is considered part of a CBSA, albeit an "outlying area." That change alone will mean that 105 counties containing no community of 2,500 or more people will now be part of either a metropolitan or a micropolitan region.

What difference does it make? After all, sticks and stones may break your bones, but names can never hurt you. Well, it does matter, because it's about money. Though the OMB loudly proclaims that this new classification system is only to be used for statistical purposes, it knows better than anyone that these definitions will creep their way into federal statutes as the basis for distributing money. In this case, names really can hurt you.

We've gone from being defined as what we are not—metropolitan—to being defined as where we don't belong—in a CBSA, where the federal money is.

But maybe this is a good thing. When federal funds are divided up according to nonmetropolitan classification, a lot of money ends up serving the interests of the counties that form the commuting periphery of big cities. Maybe the more they shrink us, the greater the chance that our diminished share of the pie will actually reach some truly rural places—places even the OMB would know as "rural."❖

Ohio Litigation

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coming months to see whether success in the court room translates into success on the ground in rural areas.

For more information, visit the Web site of the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy in School Funding at http://www.ohiocoalition.org, or call them at 614.228.6540. Or visit Rural Action at http://www.ruralaction.org or call them at 740.767.4938.❖

Deconsolidation Plan Passes in Colorado School Districts

Making Four Where There Were Only Two Before

Voters in Colorado's East Yuma County school district voted to deconsolidate their district into two districts. Under the approved plan, the territory, assets, and tax base of the current district will be divided into two districts that will hold separate school board elections in March. The new boards will then work as nonvoting members of the existing single district board for four months before formally taking over the reins of their separate districts.

The current district has two K–12 schools: a tiny one in Idalia (132 students) and a much larger one (900 students) in Wray, 29 miles away. Though this is formally a case of one district breaking into two districts, it is largely perceived as tiny Idalia seeking its own chance to govern its small school, separate from much larger Wray. The Idalia school is a member of a consortium of schools called Stewards of the High Plains, an affiliated partner of the Rural School and Community Trust. The plan passed by a wide margin. A similar deconsolidation vote also passed by a wide margin in the adjacent West Yuma County school district.

In Idalia, a deconsolidation community education committee has been meeting monthly to discuss what kind of educational plan they hope the new school adopts. Although it has no legal authority in this process, the committee is trying to organize a consensus about how to create the kind of school the community really wants. Some prefer to take things a step at a time, completing the separation before considering new educational approaches. Others think the time will never be better to start out right.

It's not all a bed of roses, reports Betty Moellenberg, the project director for Stewards of the High Plains. "We have some hard times ahead. As a community we aren't used to constructive conflict. Having Wray to blame and deflect anger, we never learned give and take. I predict we will learn some conflict resolution skills that should have been learned long ago."

Democracy takes work, no doubt. Having small schools governed close to home is no panacea to the problems of modern education. People have to know how to make their peace with one another and find the common ground. Idalia is not only taking a chance on itself, but on democracy as well.

For more on Stewards of the High Plains, visit the Rural Trust Web site at http://www.ruraledu.org/projects.html#Colorado.❖

Matters of Fact

Indicators of school quality

The National Center for Education Statistics has published a report on school quality. *Monitoring School Quality: An Indicators Report* reviews 13 characteristics that are most likely related to school quality and student learning. Indicators are grouped into three categories: teachers, classrooms, and schools. They include teacher experience and professional development, course content, technology, and discipline. For each indicator, the report identifies where national data are currently available and reliable. For more information or to view the report, visit http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001030 or call 202.502.7300.

Rural Iowa districts fight sales tax

Rural superintendents in Iowa are joining together to file a lawsuit to challenge the state's local-option sales tax law. Because most of Iowa's retail tax base is located in a few cities, urban areas are benefiting from the sales tax. Rural districts, however, don't have enough retail business to generate the necessary funds. A study completed by Ken Stone, an

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Idaho Addresses Key Issues

In April, *Rural Policy Matters* reported that the condition of school facilities in Idaho was poor and even dangerous in some cases. The judge still has not ruled on a lawsuit brought by some school districts claiming that Idaho is not providing "a uniform and thorough" education system. However, Idaho has taken small steps to deal with the crisis, brought about largely because the state has always left school facilities issues in the hands of local districts.

Building codes and other regulations often present a problem in facilities maintenance, renovation, and new construction. In the words of a new law in Idaho, regulations can be "restricting, conflicting, duplicating and unnecessary" and impose "requirements which . . . unnecessarily increase construction costs or retard the use of new materials and methods." In an effort to change this, on April 14, 2000, the governor signed the Uniform Public School Safety law (Chapter 80, Title 39 of the Idaho Code), which created a commission to create a uniform code for the protection of students and others who use school facilities.

In addition, recognizing that there are school facilities in Idaho in which potentially dangerous conditions exist, the Idaho Legislature passed Chapter 16, Title 33 of the Idaho Code. This law creates a "school health and safety revolving loan fund to be used to abate unsafe and unhealthy conditions in public school facilities when the school district's funds are insufficient" and requires districts to complete an independent yearly assessment of the condition of school facilities. ❖

Matters of Fact

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economist at Iowa State University, found that urban areas can generate more than ten times the sales tax revenue per student than poorer, rural areas can.

School locator updated

Need to find the most up-to-date information on your school or district? Want to know if your school is considered rural? The National Center for Education Statistics has updated its Public School/District Locator with 1998-99 data. The tool enables users to search for student, teacher, and finance information for schools and districts. The locator is available at http://nces.ed.gov/ccdweb/school/ ❖

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